MY THREE LIVES

TERESA LIGHTWOOD

The amazing story of a woman who was first a Catholic missionary nun, then a nurse in Bangkok, and is now married and living with her husband and two children in India.

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by TERESA LIGHTWOOD

Illustrated with photographs

"If only I had more than one life to live" is a wish that almost everybody makes at one time or another. This is the remarkable story of a woman who actually lived three separate lives, each dedicated to the service of her fellow-man, in the span of one lifetime. First, she was a Catholic missionary nun. Then she left the convent and became a nurse in London and Bangkok. Today, she is married and living in India with her husband and two children.

Teresa Lightwood was an innocent, inexperienced girl of sixteen when she first entered a London convent. Hers was an active faith, which finally found its outlet in Bangkok, where she was sent as a missionary. Once there, she became devoted to the strange, primitive country of Thailand and spent fourteen happy years there, teaching school, weathering earthquakes and floods, learning to understand and love the people.

After fourteen years, the tropical climate sapped her strength until she was sent back to a convent in England to regain her health. In England her physical condition improved, but, being

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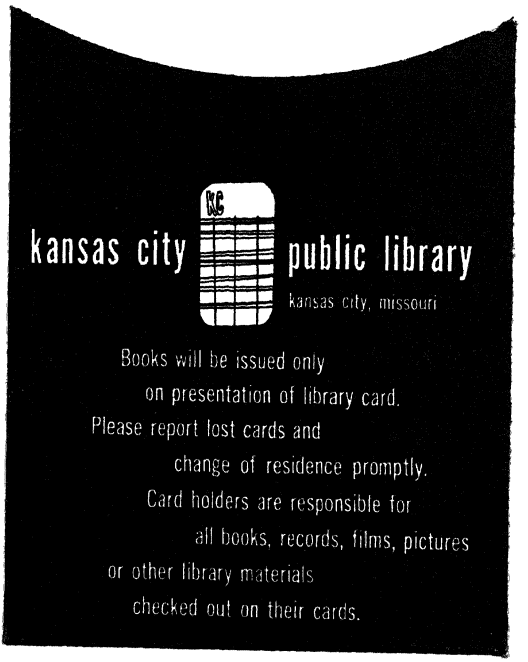
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By
TERESA LIGHTWOOD

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MY THREE LIVES

Chapter One

My First Convent

I WAS not born a Catholic. Indeed my mother, for whom I had the greatest love, was staunchly and almost bigotedly Protestant until I was about eight years old. We lived in Sheffield, a large family with a tragic toll among the thirteen children born to my parents at various times—only five of us, all girls, surviving. Father came from a well-established farming family (Lightwood Lane on the outskirts of Sheffield being our small claim to fame), and somewhere about the start of the First World War he and my mother became converted to the Catholic faith. There was a family baptism which included Father and Mother, three of my four sisters, and me, all on the same day.

On our return from the sacristy I announced that I wanted to go home and die. My mother, tolerantly amused, said, 'Why not first attend the children's service, and then see if you still want to die.' Perhaps the wish was a shade more significant than she knew, for somewhere I had heard that if a person died immediately after baptism, this would bring about a prompt and direct ascent to heaven. I fondly imagined that if I went straight to bed after the ceremony I would at once give up the ghost and proceed on the marvellous journey above the clouds. It was one example of a

form of trusting innocence that was to be part of my make-up for many years to come.

The next part of childhood was dogged by a good deal of physical pain. Unlike my sisters I was not especially bright at school, but I was a notably good swimmer until the age of eleven when my legs became crippled through rheumatic gout. That put an early end to my one big sporting enthusiasm.

Then at fourteen an operation was successfully carried out on both legs, which had to be broken and reset, but by this time a deeply-ingrained misery about their misshapenness was creating a marked inferiority. For at least three years boys had been making fun of my bowed ankles and awful knock-knees, and girls at school were often just as callous. Yet although it was both difficult and painful to walk I was not even aware of the scale of the deformity until the day I first caught sight of myself in a full-length mirror. It was a gigantic shock to see the legs and ankles that were once so straight and supple. From that moment I was unable to walk across a room without much self-conscious effort, and long after the limbs were again made straight I would never dance or do anything that might focus attention on my unusually slight stature.

The worst of all blows came in 1920, soon after I had returned from hospital and was once more beginning to walk with normal ease. My adored mother died suddenly following a stroke. This loss was so unbearable that for a while the ensuing psychological disturbance must have been abnormally deep, for I would talk to myself in the street, stopping at corners and beside shop windows to peer hard into the faces of strange women in the hope that among them I might find my mother still alive.

Once when I exuberantly announced how much I loved her, she had said with great simplicity: 'My dear child, you will never be able to live without love.' And for long after her death, so it seemed to be.

It must not be supposed that this was the basic cause of my entering the convent. Certainly the impact of my mother's death must have accelerated the decision, but for quite a few years I had been not only most assiduous in my church-going, I had also voiced, to Mother as well as to one of my sisters, the strong desire to become a nun. I cannot for the life of me imagine how or where this childhood thought had its beginnings, for in general I was not at all enamoured of the nuns I knew at the convent school I attended.

It was not long, anyway, before Christ began to assume an exceptionally personal form in my young life. God too became more personal than ever, as if His love were being intensified to make up for the loss of my mother's; and at fifteen I began to dwell on the idea that there could be no greater joy on this earth than to live for God alone.

Sitting in my room, or day-dreaming at school, I would picture myself in the nun's life, wearing the habit, going about the daily work of the convent, feeling the eternal peace that constant prayer would bring. The commercial and social world of the oncoming twenties was completely unknown to me; I had always been kept very much a child, and at no time in my reverie was there the slightest feeling that entry into the cloister would mean giving up the pleasures, hopes and ambitions of ordinary living.

So, with the aid of a convent sister at Sheffield, my application was posted off to the London convent where I was to start as novice and postulant. The application was accepted, but I was asked to wait six months before making the journey to London. The truth was that the novice mistress there did not at all like the idea of an adolescent girl entering the novitiate.

Each day during the months of waiting I attended the Sheffield convent where my guide and sponsor, Sister Catherine, set me a variety of tasks and lessons, to try me out

and also presumably to satisfy herself that I had the true vocation. For myself, I had no doubts of it.

At long last came the moment that represented a gateway to fulfilment of my deepest hopes. On 23rd May 1922, I walked into the spacious garden of my new convent home.

Down one side was a long shady broadwalk where the branches of lime and fruit trees meeting overhead created an avenue of colour. Apple and cherry blossom were out, and there were wallflowers and forget-me-nots. In the centre of a circular lawn stood a magnificent tulip tree, one of the few in England, as I later learned, and this one was an ancient beauty under whose shade Cardinal Newman used to talk with the nuns of the 1850s.

I was shown first to a room called the parlour, where the novice mistress received me. Only a few days were to pass before I sensed her kindness and sympathy, but during the first five minutes my heart sank as I sensed only coldness in her greeting.

Her opening words were, 'Well, I suppose I must welcome you.' In fact, she was appalled at the prospect of a sixteen-year-old in the novitiate, already having what she called 'quite enough children' in the nearby school. This was nothing, however, compared with the shock she was given by my physical appearance. I looked at least thirty, she told me, with the black rings under my eyes and the generally haggard air I had worn since the death of my mother.

Seated in the parlour I was given a cup of tea, made a shy bow to the Reverend Mother who also came to greet me, and was then whisked away to the novices' dormitory to be shown my cell.

We climbed innumerable stairs leading almost to the eaves of the building. Then the novice mistress paused for breath at the entry to a long cell corridor where everything was painted a drab brown, fanlight windows giving the place its light. The doorways of the nuns' cells lined both sides of the corridor (it was a fairly large community

with nearly a hundred nuns and postulants) and one of these doors led to the novices' dormitory, where the novice mistress also had her cell. It was not a dormitory in the orthodox sense, but a passageway where a series of Gothic arches led into double cubicles, each of them divided by a hardboard screen into two tiny cells.

On my bed was a blue and white checked counterpane, and a check curtain of the same material hung at the entrance, the sole splash of colour to relieve austerity. No mirrors were to be found either in this or any other part of the convent.

The mistress told me there were now twelve novices. She reminded me that conversation in the dormitory was forbidden at all times, and that no 'extras' were permitted in the cells except a change of underclothing, adding with the first hint of a smile that owing to my youth I would be allowed to remain in bed until 5.30 each morning, instead of rising for prayers with the rest of the community at 4.45.

Alone and conscious of coldness in the air despite the bright summer sunshine outside, a rush of homesickness enveloped me. But soon my mind switched to anticipation of the peaceful days ahead, and I looked around the cell, examining with a kind of ascetic satisfaction each item of its stark furnishings. In a moment the place was aglow with comfort and warmth.

It was not the bareness of our cells that alarmed me during the first months of life at the convent in London. In fact, there was only joy in a total acceptance of the poverty represented by the few chattels allotted to the postulant nun . . . the plain iron bedstead with straw palliasse, the hard chair, the washstand and cracked basin, the square of oilcloth to guard against splashes on the wall, the small oblong of worn carpet, the crucifix over the bed and the framed picture of the nun's patron saint, in my case St. Teresa the Little Flower of Lisieux.

There was only one fly in the ointment of content. This

was my size. At the age of sixteen, as at eleven (and at fifty, for that matter) I was never more than four feet ten inches. A childhood operation on my legs had stopped all further growth, and I had always longed to be a few inches taller.

When my first convent habit was made, it was thought I might still grow another inch or two and the dress was therefore allowed to trail a little on the long side. Discontented all the same, I decided to take matters into my own hands, or rather to place them in the hands of the Little Flower. So one night I knelt and prayed to St. Teresa, asking to be given a few more inches of stature.

Convinced the prayer would be granted by dawn the next day I was about to climb into bed, naively satisfied with the prospect, when suddenly a feeling of vast uncertainty came over me. Suppose St. Teresa heard and answered the prayer. Suppose that I turned into a postulant of five feet two, or three, or even taller. Imagine the entry I would make at chapel and breakfast in the morning, with my habit too short and embarrassment writ large all over my face. This was the reasoning that went vaguely through my head.

Kneeling again, child that I was, I changed the plea to the Little Flower. 'No, not any taller, better leave me as I am,' I told her. I then slept, awakened soon after 4.30, went down to prayers, and thought little more of the great concern over my height.

Whether the prayer, the strange uncertainty, the indecision and conflict, were a symbol of some deeper conflict that was to end twenty years later in a renunciation of my vows, I do not know. But in that remote time of 1922 there was no doubt that my four feet ten inches was the only obvious cloud in the entire sky of my adolescent convent days.

It was 1923, there was a blazing August sun, and for the first time I was putting on, with more pride than

humility, the full livery of the life I imagined would endure to the end of my days.

For the girl nun there were to be several of these marvellous hours when marriage with God would be marked by ceremonies, but none more crammed with grace and happiness than on this Clothing Day, fifteen months after entering the convent, when I received the habit of the Order I had joined.

There was one other girl postulant with me, and we were wearing our simple novice dresses—long shapeless black gowns, each topped by an elbow-length cape, and a black net cap held by elastic on the cropped hair. For some reason the religious community I entered did not permit the young postulant nun to be dressed as a bride on this sanctified occasion (the normal practice in many Orders), but the ritual was no less impressive for that.

A bishop conducted the ceremony. In the chapel, kneeling or standing before the altar rails, I trembled while Mass was celebrated, then waited for the bishop's vital question: 'What do you desire?'

'My desire is to join the community of X,' I answered slowly.

The bishop demanded to know if I was aware of all that this entailed. I replied that I was, and voiced my willingness to follow The Rule in all its perfection.

Prayers were then recited. A moment later I was being led to a small cold room adjoining the chapel.

Each article of the nun's new habit was meantime being blessed, and after the blessing the clothing was brought for me to put on.

Soon I was fully dressed—still a postulant or 'apprentice', but now attired in the full habit, except for the veil. That was being held by the Reverend Mother who remained in the chapel awaiting my return, and when all was ready I walked from the ante-room to stand once more near the altar rails.

There, the Reverend Mother adjusted the veil around my new black headpiece. This was not all. On my head she also placed a crown of white roses. It was a symbol of the crown that would be worn in heaven if throughout the years I kept my part of the marriage pact, devoting myself to striving after perfection and holiness for the sake of the spouse of my soul.

Without a doubt it was a day of supernatural joy—and what earthly spouse, I asked myself in later years, would dare offer Heaven to his beloved?

Then, in a split second, or so it seemed, I was nineteen, and it was 15th August 1925, two years after receiving the habit.

That day my novice state had come to an end as I reached the first stage of profession and pronounced my vows as a nun.

'To consecrate myself to God by the Vows of Chastity, Obedience and Poverty. . . .'

I was wearing a white veil. Towards the end of the service this was exchanged for the conventional black veil. On this day, too, a crown of roses was placed on my head, and it was to stay there until the night prayers of the community were ended. Not until after dusk did I return to the convent chapel, remove the crown and lay it with immense reverence at the foot of the altar.

Chastity, Obedience, Poverty. . . .

By the vow of chastity I was not only renouncing all pleasures of the flesh, but setting out on the well-nigh impassable road that leads to absolute purity and chastity of thought.

By the vow of obedience I was renouncing that prized if inexpressible possession 'free will'.

By the vow of poverty I would have no claims to earthly possessions, legacies or earnings of any kind.

In the affairs and daily habits of convent life it was

surprising what came under the heading called Holy Charity. One day the novice mistress chided several of us postulants for no other reason than that we showed signs of a poor appetite at dinner. 'Even that reveals a failing against charity,' she said. 'Remember that your neighbour at mealtimes may have an excellent appetite, yet the sight of a poor eater at her elbow might make her shy and fearful of taking all the food she needs.'

For the newcomer there were many such pitfalls in the training that was based on a rigorous enforcement of The Rule, that inexorable foundation of conventual living. Every act of every day, from dawn to night prayers, had the aim of fulfilling the simple precept voiced by St. Paul and St. Augustine, 'Whether in eating, drinking or taking your repose, do all for the glory of God.' I soon found that it was in its way a significant formula in the lives of the nuns, for a good many of the laws, penances and acts of mortification were given expression around the dining-table, the only place apart from chapel where the entire community habitually congregated.

From chapel each day we walked to the refectory in a procession that was always led by the youngest member. And in every convent youngest means the newest recruit, no matter her age in years. This form of precedence was astonishingly strict—so all-pervading, in fact, that it often seemed to me that nuns would die in rank.

Beside the two long dining tables two lines were formed, a superior at the head of each. After a long grace in Latin, each nun then took her place, the eldest in rank sitting next to the superior, the youngest at the far end. Once seated, we waited with hands folded until, at the sound of a bell, napkins were unrolled and sleeves pushed back. The meal began.

A spiritual book was read from the refectory pulpit and from start to finish of the meal there was no word of conversation. As the server offered the dish, each nun took

whatever slice of meat or vegetables lay nearest. To pick and choose was an infringement of The Rule. To ask for anything for oneself from the server was also forbidden. The only method of obtaining a glass of water, say, or a slice of bread, was to indicate those needs to your neighbour: placing a hand palm downwards on the table was the sign for bread, touching the empty tumbler showed thirst.

It was just too unfortunate for the one who sat next to a religious whose mind was perpetually in the clouds. All the same, any nun who failed to notice the needs of her neighbour was committing a transgression. Sometimes the penalty for such absentmindedness was to stand in the middle of the refectory after the meal and accuse oneself of negligence, whereupon one would be told to kiss the ground. All convents enforce such penances, though by the time I reached the Far East I was interested to note that kissing the ground was considered a danger to health; instead, we kissed the hem of the habit, carefully placed in position on the floor. Acceptance, in the right spirit, of humiliations great and small is the aim and obligation of every nun. Doing penance in public was an integral part of the training.

Early in my novitiate there were mornings when I failed to jump from my bed at the first sound of the calling bell—sometimes I did not even hear it—and on such mornings I would go to the novice mistress and accuse myself of this fault. Often as not my penance on these occasions was to eat my meal kneeling, either beside the bench in the refectory or out in the middle of the room.

Acts of penance were never spectacular. It was held that to perform great penances might engender perilous feelings of satisfaction and self-glory. One could easily become proud of the very deeds that were intended to make one humble. Many acts, therefore, had to go unnoticed by the community, and there were countless small ways of gaining mastery over self, 'perfect abnegation of self' it was termed in The Rule. Several acts of mortification involved nothing

more than going without some minor pleasure of the senses; or in not answering back when harshly spoken to; or not asking for things one needed; or not reading something one desired greatly to read—a letter from home, for instance; or making some enjoyable food unpalatable, perhaps by pouring salt into a dessert.

There were many others, such as kissing the feet of the sisters. And there was also the 'Discipline', a small whip made of knotted cord to be used on oneself twice or more times each week.

My first experiences of flagellation did not produce the expected feelings of repugnance, nor any nervous doubt as to the decency and value of such bodily pain self-inflicted. Anyone who suspects, nevertheless, the existence of an element of masochistic enjoyment in the nun's use of the discipline should pause to consider the mental and emotional climate that surrounds her as she stands, alone and lonely in her chill convent cell, with the whip in her hand.

For myself, as for most others, these were moments of great misery and fear as the knotted cord was made to bite into the flesh. There was no sensual glory, and I honestly think no self-pity, in this torture.

In fact, the act of penance that remained all my life most heavily stamped on the memory was not the whip. It was another strikingly simple imposition of physical strain. It consisted of sitting on the low dining bench for a half-hour, or longer, with one foot all the time kept raised from the floor. For several years I never took a meal with both feet on the ground.

All these, it should be recorded, were not designed as punishments to break the spirit. Without doubt they were a part of the continual striving towards the perfect life—and denying herself the things she craved was the nun's way of attaining a small degree of perfection in accordance with God's design. It is for love of God that she goes into religion, and to be near Him, not only now, but in Eternity. And

as the earthly spouse thinks only, or mainly, of her beloved, so the nun tries constantly to weed out of her heart all thoughts that are alien to a true fulfilment of the marriage with the heavenly spouse. Denied the visible presence of her lover, she can see Him only through the eyes of her faith, a faith, moreover, that is undimmed by earthly attachments, not even the most trivial attachment to herself and her natural desires.

The day in the convent began early, and the intense cold of my cell at 4.45 in the morning was an agony that was acutely remembered even twenty years later. The first three hours were spent in prayer, meditation and Holy Mass. Then came a plain breakfast followed by the domestic and other tasks for the day, with not a second wasted. Towards evening there were two hours of recreation in which our conversations were limited by the very nature of the lives we led. Yet for all the austerity there was tremendous gaiety and laughter in the cloister—laughter free from malice, the laughter of elated innocence. For the most part our pleasures were certainly childlike, a favourite game consisting of a breathless race to determine who would be first inside the chapel doors. Few individuals in the sophisticated outside world could be expected to look on our antics with anything more than a benevolent boredom that would doubtless be tinged with surprise.

Austerity always took a back seat on feast days, particularly on the Reverend Mother's feast day, and during my first year I was quite taken aback by the relaxed simple humour and the all-round levity of the occasion. Starting at breakfast-time we had the order of the day read to us from the refectory pulpit. It turned out to be a satirical oration transforming the usual statement of our activities into an enjoyable whirl. We were allowed this day to talk throughout the meals, and to talk at all hours except in the cells and cloisters.

In the evening a coterie of the nuns staged a concert.

The life and personality of one nun was performed in the style of Longfellow's 'Hiawatha'. Next came a slapstick presentation of that melodramatic ode 'Lord Ullan's Daughter'. For this our sedate novice mistress wore a plaid and beret on top of her habit, and stood at some imaginary water's edge pleading for the return of her daughter who, together with her swain, was being engulfed by raging waves. Two more of the community clung to each other with mock horror while seated in a zinc bathtub representing the waters. Four of our more solidly-built nuns simulated the terror of the storm by agitating a carpet which they held under the tub. It was a day contrasting sharply with those hours of mortification, of self-abnegation with feet off the floor or the harsh penance of the disciplinary lash.

In the first two years I was happier than at any time I could remember. For weeks in advance of the Reverend Mother's feast day all the nuns would be hard at work making gifts—pieces of sewing, crochet work, children's toys and so on—that would be displayed on a large table throughout the festive day. It was traditional to keep all this activity a secret from the eyes and ears of Reverend Mother, who was supposed to be filled with surprised delight by the sight of the gifts destined for schools, hospitals and churches. The work was carried out only during our recreation periods and a lot of ingenuity was spent hiding the stuff from view whenever the Reverend Mother appeared on the scene. She knew precisely what was going on, all the same, and on the morning of the feast day when the handiwork was exhibited she was always obliged to pretend that she had no inkling of the energetic weeks gone by. We in turn were always gratified by her reaction to the array.

In such ways, somehow, the childhood which had been altogether lost to me between the ages of eleven and sixteen was gradually restored in the life of the novitiate. In the characters of those around me I saw only perfection,

while the peace of the cloister, which came up to all my expectations, was like a tonic, fresh and rejuvenating so that haggard expressions were smoothed away, my complexion lost its blemishes and shadows, and I became younger in looks as the months passed. I might add that throughout this time, too, obedience came far more easily to me than it was ever to manifest itself in later years.

As convents go, this was not among the oldest institutions. It was begun by the first nuns to cross the Channel from Holland, the first nuns to be allowed to wear the religious habit in England since the Reformation. Pioneers of those days still suffered the indignity of citizens throwing mud and stones at them whenever they appeared in the streets. By the 1900s the convent consisted of two large buildings, the original premises used as kindergarten school where secular teachers lived, and a new house which had become the convent proper. We were a semi-enclosed Order, which meant that no nun was allowed outside the grounds unless there was strict necessity. Only during our two hours of daily recreation was the silence broken. The convent gardens were a delight to us all. Thousands of spring daffodils bloomed around the base of the ancient tulip tree on the lawn; the tulip-shaped flowers came later, in summer, and by autumn the foliage was a dazzling golden yellow that made the dying leaves of other trees less bright by comparison.

Governing the community were two remarkable women, saintly even by the best religious standards. The Reverend Mother was a small, hunchbacked woman who spoke her mind, stood no nonsense, possessed a rare capacity for sympathetic kindliness, and had the most childlike eyes I ever saw in an adult face. Aristocratically British in temperament, she came from a well-known wealthy family who had, I believe, opposed her entry to the convent. For us she was a model of all the virtues desirable in the religious character.

Her Irish assistant, the novice mistress, was almost as outstanding with her blend of severity, holiness and goodness of heart. She it was who developed in most of us the attitude of personal love for Christ, of giving up the self and sacrificing the most natural personal feelings for love of the Beloved. Decidedly she was 'in love' with the Lord, though not in the tawdry, mawkish spirit that popular opinion often ascribes to the nun's motives. In fact, the popular belief that many such women retire into the cloistered life following unhappy love affairs and suchlike emotional tragedy is far from the truth. Most of those who enter convents are girls and young women full of the zest for living, and I doubt if there are many whose inner drive towards religion has begun in an atmosphere of agonized love-sickness. Generally speaking, the religious life is alien to what might be termed worldly sentimentality and would probably prove too tough and demanding for the self-centred needs of any unrequited lover.

The novice mistress in London was one whose selflessness reached moving heights towards the end of my novitiate. Shortly after Christmas I fell ill. It began with a sickness on Boxing Day when I was sent to the convent infirmarian, who prescribed what most of us regarded as the only remedy she stocked to deal with any and all the ills of the flesh: a large dose of castor oil. Often enough it was surprisingly efficacious, but this time it failed—the trouble was a severe bout of pneumonia.

By New Year's Day the illness was known to be grave. With sulpha drugs a thing of the future, deaths from pneumonia in the 1920s were vastly higher than nowadays, and long before the sickness had run its course my life was despaired of.

It happened that mine was not the only soul in the balance. Our novice mistress was in much worse plight, with an affliction which had troubled her for several years,

a form of gangrene in feet and hands that now attacked other parts of her body.

One night near the end of January, hearing that I was in poor straits, she prayed—offering her life to God in place of mine if He saw fit to take it.

She died the same week. My recovery began a day or two later.

Chapter Two

Farewell, Tulip Tree

THREE years of noviceship passed. Then, in the early summer of 1928 when the time for my final profession was drawing near, an important visitor to the convent brought about an opportunity that was to alter the basic pattern of my religious life and work. This was an influential member of the hierarchy, a calm, capable woman who was secretary to the Reverend Mother General of our Order. I was charged with the duty of waiting on her during her stay in London.

One day, carrying a batch of letters to her room, I paused in the blossom-laden garden to examine unusual stamps and postmarks on the envelopes from abroad. There were letters from many parts of the world, including, I remember, one from Alaska and another from Siam.

I stood in the shadow of the tulip tree idly wondering about the far-off lands and their peoples, and then, with a sudden sense of guilt and urgency, hurried on to deliver the letters. At her desk the secretary slit open the envelopes and began reading. I stood by, itching to talk but fearing to interrupt.

She looked up, surprised to find me still in attendance, and I blurted out the hope I was nursing in my breast. I had often wanted, I told her, to go out into the world of

the foreign missions, and I begged her to tell me about the work performed by the sisters in strange countries.

In matter-of-fact tones she began painting what seemed to me an inspired picture of the missionary's life. My boldness grew and I announced yet again that for a long time I had been overwhelmed by an urge to work in the mission field.

There was a moment's silence while she gave me a cool stare. Then she asked: 'Why do you wish to serve in this way?' I reddened, considering how to make her believe in the worthiness of my motives.

'Already the Lord has given me so much,' I said. 'All the years I spend here are years of receiving, and I believe I am now ready to give Him something in return.'

Again she smiled. 'And what do you imagine you will be giving?' she asked.

'To leave my convent, family and country is the biggest sacrifice I can think of making,' I said.

She nodded slowly but made no comment. I had a sudden tweak of conscience as I left the room, for whenever in the past I had mentioned the foreign missions to our superiors, they had always insisted I could not be spared and said that all such longings must be sacrificed for the good of the community.

A few days later, however, my spirits jumped to unknown heights when I learned the secretary had taken my outburst seriously and passed on my craving, if such it was, to the Reverend Mother herself. With it presumably went the secretary's recommendation that I might be spared for missionary work abroad. At all events it was not long before I was clutching a letter from her declaring that I should prepare for departure to Siam as soon as my final vows were pronounced. The prospect of an altogether new life of love and satisfaction was spread before me.

As the day of my profession approached, the inner happiness became almost unbearable; it was a feeling of

contentment so vast that I was impelled to hide it from all those around me; it seemed somehow ill-bred and lacking in love to be so glad to take my leave of the quiet English convent and the family of sisters I had grown to love so deeply.

My profession was fixed for 15th August that same year. I was twenty-two, and with two other convent sisters the final vows were to be taken three years to the day after consecrating myself to God in chastity, obedience and poverty. Throughout the time of formation I was always at liberty to leave the Order—indeed, there are many more who leave than stay—but for myself there was rarely, if ever, a moment of real doubt. I had enjoyed the serenity, the remoteness from the outside world. I was unaware of the everyday conflicts, decisions, emotional problems, filling most people's lives. I had never read a novel. Away from the stimulus of books, plays, films, radio and other people's experiences I moved in my more or less silent world as innocent and ignorant as any child of that decade and a good deal more so than children of this one.

It may be that my continual pleas to be allowed to serve in the foreign missions were in fact a form of protest, an expression, perhaps, of some subconscious longing for a more active life. Never particularly adept or inclined in the direction of self-analysis, I do not know. Certainly it was never easy to accept the rulings of superiors who bade me suppress these desires. If God wanted it, they chided, He would see to it in His own time and find a way. Meantime it was my duty to submit and obey.

But as the final weeks of preparation brought a heightening of the intense solemnity, I felt no doubt whatever that God in His goodness was the one who was now allowing me to serve the Church along the paths that would give the greatest joy.

And so, to the cry of 'Veni sponsa Christi!' I pronounced my final vows with the deepest possible sense of dedication.

Preparations for departure began soon afterwards. The Reverend Mother took everything in hand, applied for my passport, wrote the few necessary letters, detailed the nun in charge of linen to see to my simple clothing needs, and there was little to do but wait with as much patience as I could muster for the coming of autumn.

These weeks of waiting quelled much of the excitement and brought the heaviness of leave-taking right into my heart. From Sheffield my sisters came to the convent, bringing their children to say good-bye. The final week before sailing was suddenly charged with sadness. I began to feel the parting more sharply than I had thought possible, for I loved not only my own family but also this whole community of women, and every stick and stone of the convent around us.

Into the vision of the future and the long-anticipated voyage to Siam there also crept a touch of fear. For six years my sole excursions outside the garden walls in London had been occasional, usually painful, visits to the dentist.

On the October morning when I left the convent, the garden was rich with autumn colour. The Reverend Mother was escorting me as far as Dover. I remember the falling leaves crackling as the gate slowly opened. Stepping aside to allow her to precede me, I took one last look at the outlines against the sky. Clearest of all was the tulip tree, its smooth grey-green trunk reaching thirty or so feet into the air, its foliage glowing in the weak October sun like an orange-coloured umbrella. It was an aptly exotic farewell sight before sailing to the yet more exotic world of Bangkok.

First I was to go to the convent of Tournai, in France, there to meet a travelling companion, a nun from Holland. At midday when we reached Dover, the Ostend boat was waiting. My good-byes with the Reverend Mother were brief, with few words and no visible emotion. I climbed the gangplank feeling very small and alone, stood on deck

waiting for the departure, and then for a long time watched the dockside slowly recede until the familiar figure of Reverend Mother in her habit was distant, tiny, impersonal; a vague black creature with a white-framed head.

It was after dusk when I lowered myself from the steep French train at Tournai railway station. To my relief there emerged from the darkness an elderly, wrinkled nun who called my name. We shook hands, and she conducted me to an ancient car in which the Dutch sister who was to be my travelling companion was already installed. Soon we were rattling along cobbled streets towards the convent. I was impressed, and thankful, that the Dutch nun spoke excellent English.

Next day, another rail trip—and my first sight of Paris.

There was neither time nor inclination for sightseeing. I watched the city only from a taxi as we sped through heavy rain towards our night shelter. *En route* for the missions at long last, I had no interest in works of art, nor in the shops, cafés and tourist spots. We did not even see Notre Dame, and Paris flashed past with nothing more than a memory of a million lights reflected in shining wet boulevards.

Continuing the journey next morning we found ourselves tightly packed in a crowded train bound for Marseilles, with two fat market women, a powerful smell of garlic and the stink of smoke from the pipes of a quartet of French sailors occupying our carriage. After a while, with some daring, I begged leave to open a window. Nobody objected, but unhappily the window-catch was broken. I was able to survive the journey only by using a device that caused much laughter among our fellow passengers. After racking my brain for almost an hour I brought out my luncheon box and effectively wedged the window with a large hunk of cheese.

Then came a string of minor mishaps. At Marseilles the convent was locked and barred and it took an age to

gain admission. Since we were also unexpected, no food had been prepared for our arrival, so we were two tired, dishevelled nuns who went to our cell hungry that night.

It was a single cell with no dividing curtains; so, in accordance with the rules, we were obliged to dress in darkness the next morning. It was long after Mass before I could discover why one of my feet had grown so painful. A black streak had appeared half-way up the leg, and one toe was black and swollen. I had unhappy visions of being stranded at Marseilles, unable to sail.

Owing to a dock strike, however, our embarkation was postponed. The French nuns had plenty of time during the next few days to poultice my leg until the poison finally emerged. On sailing day I was able to hobble aboard more or less recovered.

We were quite a colony of nuns on the ship—eleven Little Sisters of the Poor apart from ourselves, so we were soon accepted as part of the community. My Dutch companion and I had hoped to share a cabin, but space was at a premium and we had two young children and their miserably sea-sick mother installed in the lower bunks of our already cramped quarters.

The first night at sea, when we had all contrived to fit ourselves in, the father of the family came along to say good night. He was a tall man, his head reaching the level of my bunk. Filled with confusion at the thought of being seen with my own head bared, I held up my pillow, using it as a shield while waiting for him to depart.

But there was to be no hope of repulsing the traditional gallantry and courteous air of this French papa. Without the slightest self-consciousness he defeated all my attempts at self-effacement.

'*Dormez bien. Bonne nuit!*' he called, suddenly shoving his head around my barrier.

It was, incidentally, the first time since donning the habit that my haircut had caused me embarrassment.

During the noviceship the nun's hair is cropped, but never too short in case the novice decides to leave the religious life. After final profession, my hair being so thick and the summer so hot, it was cut very short at my own request. Usually a nun's hair is shorn by anyone who has the time to spare, and often with nothing better than a pair of nail scissors she does the job for herself. We had no mirrors, of course, and the shearing certainly produced some bizarre effects.

Altogether the voyage was a stirring prelude to the life ahead. Along the coast of Italy, seeing the volcanic mass of Stromboli; through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea, watching the tiny shapes of a string of camels approaching a green oasis; and a sunrise over the mountains of Zion.

It gave me an appetite for sightseeing which before long was to involve me and my Dutch friend in what I dare say is among the queerer situations experienced by any pair of devout young nuns: an unplanned evening in a smoky Colombo night-club.

During the voyage we were befriended by a Javanese businessman and his wife, and when we reached Ceylon they invited us to join them in a day's tour around the capital. We accepted.

Colombo was our first contact with the Far East. I was impressed with its clean, broad streets, the avenues of trees and the general contrast with sordid Djibuti or Port Said, our last ports of call. At Colombo, too, riding in a carriage pulled around the bay by an unhappy-looking nag, I saw for the first time coolies clad in loin-cloths.

We wandered the streets in the afternoon, besieged by smiling, rowdy boys for ever demanding *baksheesh.* By evening we were all very hungry and when Mr. K., our Javanese friend, suggested dinner at an unpretentious-looking restaurant in the centre of town, we gladly agreed. It was quickly apparent, once inside, that this was no ordinary restaurant. A garish cocktail bar along one wall, a band playing jazz

from a platform in a recess, a square of polished floor left clear for dancing. The Dutch sister gave me apprehensive looks. No less unnerved, I smiled weakly. We did not speak, but we were aware within five seconds that it was hardly the atmosphere for nuns to take a simple evening meal.

Mr. K., oddly unconcerned with his guests wearing full religious habit, startled us yet further by suggesting a drink at the bar before ordering our dinner. I explained firmly that in our habits we would be a distinctly unseemly pair perched on high stools. 'Yes, of course, how stupid of me —we will sit at the table,' he said, with a casual air of understanding, as if the absurdity had only just struck him.

Heads were already turned in our direction, and even though the table was in the most secluded corner of the L-shaped room, we were the centre of attention for quite a time. By then it was clear we would have to see the thing through. I ordered lime juice for myself and my companion.

The waiters, with long black hair drawn into a bun on top of the head (ours had also an ornamental yellow comb) wore colourful plaid sarong-style dress. On the crowded floor the dancers were a varied lot, some smooth and easy, others ill-matched, lacking all grace and often merely comical. None were more awkward, I reflected, than the couples who were dancing cheek to cheek, a form of romantic display, it should be noted, which I had never before seen.

Dinner was slow, with long intervals between courses, and with our coffee came a dull cabaret, with girls in tawdry costumes, all fixed smiles and mechanical movement. At the end of the evening we did our best to assure Mr. K. he had given us an interesting interlude. But later, when we reached the ship, the Dutch sister and I hastily agreed that in our letters to our respective communities it would be wiser to make no mention of the episode. I shuddered to think of our Superiors' reaction to the picture of two spiritual daughters dining in a dingy night-club while journeying to the missions.

This night apart, however, our communities would have been fairly content with our way of life. Throughout the voyage we kept to the same timetable as in any European convent. We rose at 5 a.m. in order to say our prayers and make meditation before Mass, and we usually retired to bed at 8.30 p.m., thereby missing the loveliest hours of the day.

One week later, at Singapore, we left the comfort and stability of our passenger liner for a small, grubby ship bound for Bangkok.

Within a few hours we met the full blast of winds from the China Sea and at once the little ship began tossing madly. Sick and unable to stay on our feet, we retired to the cabin to lie unhappily in our bunks. I had not even the strength to remove my heavy shoes.

There was no stewardess aboard, the sole attendant being a chirrupy cabin boy who poked his head around the door from time to time to enquire into our needs. At first I wondered about the propriety of accepting his attentions, but before two days were gone I was beyond caring.

On the fifth day out from Singapore, exactly a month after leaving Marseilles, we reached the Gulf of Siam, entering it under blue skies and on a calm sea. There we could sit on deck enjoying the sun and watching the scene change as we went up the Chao Phya River. I had been awakened that day by the crowing of a cockerel—and to hear a cock-crow aboard ship had seemed so strange that I hurriedly dressed to go out and find where it came from. It was then I learned from one of the sailors that we had reached Pak-Nam, the mouth of the river.

The sun was not yet visible and everything on land looked like black cut-out pictures in a scrapbook. Black palm trees were silhouetted against the sky, black masts on the river and black buildings on the river banks. Then the faintest of pinks showed in the sky, and as the shapes and colours emerged the sailors told me that this was the mother of all rivers.

Around Pak-Nam it was also one of the most beautiful, with thousands of palm trees, houses growing on stilts by the water's edge and temples with fantastically coloured roofs. In contrast, the muddy river water carried strange clumps of what looked like rotting vegetation—in fact, a weed with a purple hyacinth-like flower which had become, and still is, a poisonous menace to the traffic on the Chao Phya.

Soon the palm trees gave way to factories, and the waters grew muddier and busier with hundreds of small craft, most of them propelled by a lone figure standing with one leg slung carelessly over the rudder as he wielded the pole.

Reaching the docks of Bangkok I saw two familiar shapes waiting on the quayside.

As we stepped ashore, one of them—the Reverend Mother of our new convent home—held out both hands giving us welcome to Siam.

Chapter Three

Thailand Comes to Life

It was the custom, the Reverend Mother informed us, to pay our respects to the bishop and receive his blessing before proceeding to the convent. So, as soon as landing formalities were over, we headed for the centre of Bangkok. Despite the heat which made my robes hang heavily and my head-dress limp (it was unusually fierce and humid for November in Thailand), I was immediately thrilled by a hundred-and-one unfamiliar sights of the city of *klongs*, those traffic-busy canals that give Bangkok its special character.

For one encounter, however, I was totally unprepared. I remember how I stopped and shaded my eyes from the sun as they rested for the first time on the half-naked figure of a woman in native dress.

Western influences had not yet in those days transformed the graceful Siamese woman into a replica of the European fashion-magazine reader. In 1928 women and girls throughout the capital still wore the *pah-nung*, the trouser skirt favoured by men and women alike: about four yards of material wound tightly round the body, draped between the legs and fastened high at the rear. In front it covered the knees, but the thighs were revealed at the back, and above the waist there was nothing.

With my rigid code of convent modesty behind me—a

code which forbade the nun even to undress in the presence of another sister—the sight of this woman naked to the waist and talking casually with a young man on the public highway was disturbing to say the least. True, it was not long before the beauty of olive skins and the bodies that moved without artifice began to impress me. But on that day, cluttered as I was by bony stays, a long-sleeved shift and serge petticoats, I failed to appreciate the natural graces. I was in fact outraged.

Our visit to the bishop had an air of unreality following this incident and it was hard to keep my mind on what he had to say, particularly as he was a quiet little man who addressed most of his remarks into his long black beard. However, he gave his blessing, and as he spoke of the importance of the tasks we had come to perform, his childlike eyes lit up and I was suddenly aware of a true sanctity of personality.

He also said one thing that gave me a new sense of determination. 'Learn the Thai language,' he advised, 'so that you may understand the needs and problems of the people for whom you will work.'

By way of a start he then pressed a pack of cards into my hands. They were not, let me add, playing cards. These were a children's classroom aid—a series of coloured cards bearing the letters of the Thai alphabet, and with their help I was to become gratifyingly proficient at the language in little more than three months.

Then we made our way to the cathedral, where the image of the cool naked girl remained troublesome in my mind's eye. Nowadays the contrast between a visiting missionary and a native woman is ironically less marked. The stimulus of western fashion trends and all the attendant publicity have given the girls and women of Thailand a far more conventional, stereotyped outlook on clothes, whereas the nun at the express wish of the Pope has been relieved of many of the hangovers of medieval custom. And as the native

woman becomes progressively more shy of exposing herself, so the nun in her dress has taken a turn, or at least a half-turn, in the opposite direction, which is, thankfully, both more hygienic and a lot more comfortable. In fact, some of the most modern attempts to transform the religious habit have gone so far as to permit the wearing of short frock-like habits and a mere token headgear. Everywhere, too, there is a trend towards the more active conventual and missionary life, with even the older strict Orders accepting revolutionary changes that would shock to the core our Reverend Mother of the 1920s.

The Bangkok convent was located in Ploen Chitre Road, a narrow dirt street with a *klong*, or canal, on each side. At one end the house was a three-storeyed affair, at the other there were two storeys, in the centre a single storey supported on tall pillars which provided an oasis of shadow during the hot and humid seasons. At that time there was only one other building in the vicinity: the British Embassy, an imposing solid structure with a statue of an icy-looking Queen Victoria in front. Today the rough road has become a bustling metropolitan thoroughfare which includes a plushy hotel, and, according to my latest news, a night-club closing in on the old convent.

The frontage of this convent, a long, low, white building standing in a garden of green circular lawn and tall flame trees, gave a misleading impression of gracious living which was banished the moment we stepped inside. We arrived just as lunch was about to begin.

In our honour conversation was permitted, but my own contribution was monosyllabic, for I was limp with the heat, appalled at the dirt and depressed by the poverty of the cellar-like dining-room. Very soon I was also made apprehensive by the sight of a lizard that dropped from the ceiling into the already unpalatable food on the plate of my neighbour at table. In any case everyone spoke French, of which I had little knowledge, so the antics of the *chin chocs*, as the

lizards were called, remained the most vivid memory of that first meal.

The *chin chocs* were everywhere, running up and down the walls and across the ceiling, every now and then losing their foothold; but nobody showed the slightest concern or took much note of their activities. At one moment, when a plump French sister turned to her neighbour to offer a dish of rice, a *chin choc* landed with a plop on the table and slithered into her lap. She picked the creature up by its tail, gave a tolerant '*Oh là là!*' as the tail came off in her hand and the lizard fell to the floor, then continued the conversation while eating her curry.

My starry-eyed picture of the missionary's life was already being shaken and there was worse to come. With God's help I might grow accustomed, I thought, to the presence of lizards, which were after all harmless enough; but towards the end of the meagre meal, armies of ants came swarming over the table and into the dishes to claim their ration. I would never have believed that in a few short weeks I too would be learning to tolerate them along with the mosquitoes and a score of other insects, snakes and crawling creatures.

There was no doubt that for the small community of nuns it was one long tale of autocratic rule by what St. Francis called Mistress Poverty. A huge mortgage lay on the house, there was only a handful of pupils in the convent school, which in a few years was to be a thriving institution with fifteen hundred children, and the accepted method of making ends meet was a continual tightening of our belts.

Altogether we were a mixed bunch of fewer than a dozen nuns, French, English, Yugoslav, American. The first nuns ever to reach Thailand, which in those days was still known, of course, as Siam, had gone out four years earlier to live and work in a small convent house which was a part of the French-operated Chinese parish in Bangkok: a parish that was led by Père Gigout, an elderly, selfless priest who knew the people well and was himself more Chinese than the

Chinese. Two nuns were left in charge of the Chinese school and orphanage by the time I arrived, and the rest had moved some distance to the new school and convent where I was now being received.

Ours was a teaching Order. A good many months were to elapse before I could cope with Thai and French language difficulties and at first even the carrying out of my own confession demanded special arrangements. It was obvious I could not confess in French, so it was decided that I should make weekly or fortnightly visits to Père Gigout who was the only English-speaking priest. These expeditions involved a cross-town ride in a Bangkok tram, and during the rains it was a trial of endurance; the trams were flimsy single-deckers open at the sides and without windows; sometimes canvas flaps were let down in an effort to keep off the torrent, but with a full load of steaming wet passengers it was a regular ordeal. This journey, however, was far less unnerving than the role allotted to me in the convent community. Before the end of my first week the Reverend Mother called me to the poorly furnished room that was her office.

'You are no doubt anxious to learn the nature of your duties here,' she said.

'Yes, Reverend Mother,' I replied in French.

'I have decided to place you in charge of . . .' (the pause that followed seemed endless) '. . . the cooking. You can take over the kitchen tomorrow morning.'

It was a blow that almost winded me, for if ever a square peg was forced into a round hole it was the decision to turn me into a chef. The old chestnut about not being able to boil an egg was in my case all too true. I had no experience as a cook and the thought of catering for a household of a dozen people was terrifying. But the Reverend Mother waved me away and I knew that protests were useless. Half-heartedly explaining that I had never in my life cooked a proper dinner, and seeing that Reverend

Mother was already engrossed in her correspondence, I left the room to seek out Sister T., from whom I would be taking over the cuisine.

My protests might have been stronger if I had foreseen the next twelve months. The first few weeks were nightmarish. I really did ruin the boiling of eggs, which was a pity in view of the needs of the sick nun who was eating them (the convent was at first so poor that *only* those who fell ill were allowed the luxury of eggs). Nevertheless, as the weeks wore on my efforts slightly improved, and the fruits of my slight culinary powers became less bitter for the community as a whole.

Kitchen affairs might have gone smoother were it not for a fantastic upheaval caused by the building of what we all hoped would become a superb new kitchen. On the day after Christmas it was announced that I would have to do my cooking in the open air for a few months while the new premises were being built. Next morning the great move was made. The stove, cupboards, pans, pots and cutlery, tables and I were dumped on a patch of open ground, and I was given two of the older orphan girls from the Chinese convent to act as my kitchen helpers thereafter.

Apart from a strip of battered corrugated iron to act as a covering for the stove, our department was open to the sky. But there were flowering creepers all around, making the scene look as rustic as any cottage garden, a pretty sight, as I told the girls, provided we got no rain.

The rain came pelting down almost as I spoke. According to the prophets, three or four days of heavy rain about mid-February (to help the mango fruit to grow) was the most that could be expected. But the Bangkok experts, like many another weather forecaster, were dismally wrong. All through January there was rain, rain, rain, on every day that was scheduled to be dry, and our open-air kitchen soon became a bog. Tin baths, buckets and umbrellas were requisitioned in a desperate bid to make the work of food

preparation a practical operation, however primitive. Wood planks were laid on the mud to prevent us from slithering while we worked.

And somehow, soaked to the skin four or five times each day, with my habit and floppy headdress spattered all over with a nice blend of mud and cooking fats, I discovered that in an altogether unexpected way I was enjoying life as never before. It was my first real taste of the hardship that was an integral part of the work in foreign missions and presumably I thrived on it.

Some months of the open air régime went by before Reverend Mother said one day: 'Tomorrow I think you may start moving to the new site.'

Despite the fact that there seemed to be no sign of a newly-constructed kitchen I asked no questions (nuns, like proverbial good children, must be seen and rarely heard), and I was interested the next morning to find a gang of Chinese coolies armed with long bamboos and a collection of ropes and shovels, ready to install me in the new building which included a large dining-room for the convent children.

I followed the men to the site, where they put their tackle around our huge iron stove and began lifting or dragging it—a process accompanied by the unending screams and yells without which Chinese labourers seem unable to work. After much fuss the stove was deposited in a narrow rectangular space adjoining the dining-room. Then they brought my tables and cooking equipment, which in turn was stacked in the roughly made area that looked as if it were intended as a passageway to the new dining-room.

It was at this point that I could not any longer restrain my curiosity. 'Where is the new kitchen?' I demanded.

The foreman pointed at the stove and the few square feet of concreted floor around it. 'This is it,' he grunted, and a minute later his labourers began boarding up the space with thin wooden partitions which I suddenly realized were to be the walls. My grand new kitchen was to be no bigger

than a large cupboard. It had two ludicrous windows only eighteen inches square, a very low ceiling, and at one end a door that might have been positioned deliberately to let in the minimum of air. And yet, as I have said, I began enjoying life. Even the quality of the cooking showed signs of my having absorbed some elementary lessons, and it was also through this period that I made much progress in understanding both the Thai and French languages. Fluency seemed to come in a rush: one day I was still faltering and inept, and then suddenly I was conversing with ease.

But above all others, the lesson I learned in these months was one of the basic truths that ran through the religious way of life: that there is no degradation in any form of work or service, that the value of an individual human contribution to the affairs of a community lies ultimately in the spirit of the performance rather than the shape or character of the task. In the religious community even the most gifted teachers would also be found on their hands and knees scrubbing floors, and though this notion of serving others in however menial a fashion is so well-established as to be almost trite, a real-life acceptance of the menial role is rarely, in practice, quite so easy as it appears in theory.

Altogether I remained in the Bangkok community nearly four years before making my first major move. The life created a different kind of peace from that of the cloister in London, or indeed any European convent; and these years laid the foundation for my powerful attachment to the people and places of Thailand.

Bangkok and its environs really came to life only at night. During most of the year the hours before dusk were usually too hot for much prolonged physical activity, too hot even for an hour or two of shopping in comfort. In any case the whole city was altogether more glamorous after dark when the lights were lit, when the reflection of lamps caused a magic glistening across the muddy waters of the

klongs, and even the cheapest merchandise looked more colourful and appealing under the golden night glare around shops and stalls. It was only on rare occasions under our strict régime that we saw the city at night, but occasionally on the return from some errand in the evenings I would enjoy going for a trishaw ride, usually reaching the convent in time for our singing practice during recreation, a time when our own voices would be drowned by the din of a million frogs, insects and reptiles. As Sister M. habitually expressed it: 'What a racket they make—it is even worse than ours.' And it was true that sometimes we had to stop singing, defeated by the noises of insects and animals. In the rainy season especially, the choruses of frogs and toads, combined with the whine of mosquitoes, had to be experienced to be believed.

The most curious disturber of the evening was undoubtedly the terrible *tokey*, a type of large chameleon, often about the size of a young cat, its face somehow like that of a crocodile with snout missing, its hide wart-like and horrid but also electrifying in colour. The *tokeys* lived mostly on the exteriors of buildings. They had pad-like suckers on their feet and, like those of lizards, the tails would come off when subjected to any handling or damage.

The *tokey* had three distinct cries. The first would be a preliminary clearing of the throat. Then came the main croak, a noise that more or less took the form of the word *tokey*, repeated four, five, six or seven times. Finally, after the cry, came a drawn-out wheezing sound reminiscent of a very old man suffering from asthma. It was an ugly brute, though I believe its ferocious-looking armament was the façade of a much less dangerous creature than we all imagined it to be.

Every evening the community would have half an hour of meditation, during which we would walk in the convent garden where, despite the mosquitoes, it was not difficult to dwell in one's thoughts on the beauty and glory of

Heaven. Afterwards we would sit on the veranda where it was cool, and from there we would watch the *tokey*, lying prone on a whitewashed wall of the house, its tongue darting to catch the flies and insects that came into a beam of lamplight.

Only once did a *tokey* cause alarm inside the convent, and this was an evening when one of the creatures actually made an appearance in chapel. It was a weird scene, with Reverend Mother and all of us staring hard at the nasty reptile, not knowing whether to continue our devotions or voice our alarm. The *tokey* squatted two feet from the hem of Reverend Mother's habit, but its eyes were fixed on one of the sisters in the front row. It was frightening to see the intensity of this reptile stare. I was interested to learn years later that the chameleons are in fact the only reptiles capable of focusing their eyes unflinchingly on a single point. After a few minutes the tension was almost unbearable, but it was broken by Sister M., who calmly left the chapel and returned with a broom.

She stood for a moment by the wall, then made a lunge at the thing from behind. We gasped as the *tokey* turned on her and spat. Sister M. retreated a couple of paces, gave a nervous laugh, then advanced to do battle again. The *tokey* spat once more and it looked as if we would all break up in chaos when suddenly the crisis ended. Like greased lightning it shot away into a corner, then just as rapidly darted off at an angle towards the open chapel door. Sister M. shut the door with her broom, leaned against it breathing hard, and at a stern signal from Reverend Mother returned to her place. The service continued.

At night we always knew when one of the horde of frogs had been trapped, caught and consumed by a snake in the gardens. From the veranda I saw it happen several times, but this was not so chilling to the soul as hearing the slaughter take place while lying in bed. The familiar croaking of the frog would change to a higher pitch, producing a note that

was almost a cry. Somehow the cry was identifiable as one of fear and pain. Finally the snake would strike, and if you were near enough you could still hear a muffled yelp as the frog was swallowed.

All the time in the Far East, however, there would be rapid and constant changes of feeling towards the violence of life among beasts both wild and not so wild. At one moment I would be consumed with pity, at another with loathing and fear and even a cold desire to kill. One day I walked into the bathroom, shut the door and turned to hang my towel on the hook. Dangling there by one spindly leg was a queer creature, bright green and gold, with a frog's face but a body that was larger and thinner than a frog's. For some reason I decided it was one of those joke animals sold in toy shops. It was not impossible that someone like Sister M., an incorrigible practical joker, might be up to another of her tricks, so I stretched out a hand to examine the object.

The yell I gave when the eyes began moving brought Reverend Mother rapping at the door. By this time the frog was on the window ledge, and when Reverend Mother saw it she hustled me out of the bathroom slamming the door behind us.

'A lucky escape for you,' she said grimly.

'But what is it?' I said, still trembling.

'A flying frog. A poisonous and very dangerous variety,' she said. 'They squirt the poison out whenever they are attacked, and it may mean total blindness if the stuff gets into your eyes. I've seen many of them in Java.'

Over the years there were a hundred-and-one such encounters, and it was interesting to compare the respect which the Thai people always gave to nuns and others regarded as holy, with the surprise they often displayed when confronted with our 'irreligious' attitude towards the killing of animals. Even the accursed mosquitoes were spared under the laws of Buddhism. Until we have attained

on this earth the degree of merit that is needed to enter Nirvana, so goes the law, we are doomed to remain, and to be born again and again in some shape or form, the reincarnations lasting until Nirvana is achieved through merit. Who knows but that killing one mosquito may mean the slaughter of your mother or father or maybe a grandparent who was still living in that insect body?

The strength of this teaching was brought sharply home to me on the day I killed a snake for the first time. It happened at the Bangkok convent, where two of the orphan girls came running to tell me that an enormous black snake was at large in the corridor beside the lavatories. The girls conducted me, or at any rate hung on my sleeve apprehensively, to the corridor—and there it lay, an unpleasant black specimen coiled on the floor about a yard from the door.

I had brought with me from the kitchen a short club-like stick which was kept expressly for this purpose. Gripping the club I told the girls to stand back, advanced on tiptoe and wedged the door, then took the club in both hands, held it high above my head and brought it with all my strength crashing down on the coiled menace. The dreadful mess caused by the blow was quite enough to satisfy me that I had killed the thing. Feeling at once horrified and slightly pleased with my display of courage I told the two girls to fetch a shovel for the disposal. When it was all over we went to the kitchen where I noticed the pair studying me with an odd mixture of awe and worry.

'What's the trouble?' I asked.

'We did not know you would kill it,' said the elder girl.

'It will be bad for you now,' said her friend.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'You have killed the snake. You have taken life. Now you will never go to Heaven.'

It was soon afterwards that I wondered if indeed my hour had come. Often during the heavy rains there would

be not only tremendous lightning flashes but also an occasional thunderbolt falling near the convent. This time I had gone to confession, and was kneeling when it happened. The confessional was just a simple screen with a grille, a prie-dieu on one side and the priest's chair on the other. The thunderbolt crashed in the porch outside and the din threw me into such a state of shock and panic that I overbalanced. In the act the whole confessional tottered. I had virtually collapsed it all on top of the Father sitting behind the screen. To this day it remains the only undignified hour of confession I have known.

A shock of a different kind—earthquake—was another nervous excitement of those early years in Bangkok. One evening when night prayers had ended I went to my cell to prepare for bed. Standing at the wash-basin in front of my small window I was fascinated to see that the tall cotton trees outside were swaying back and forth. I was just considering whether some strange wind had got up to cause such violence when suddenly I began feeling sick. At the same moment the entire house began to creak, the walls and cupboards of my room were cracking and falling, my bed was sliding towards the middle of the floor.

Shouts came from the corridor and from the garden. I heard the word earthquake and from that moment began to believe, half panic-stricken, half-resigned, that our world was about to end. I remember grasping the window-catch, looking out and still seeing the cotton trees moving madly. Then I rushed to the bed, sat on it and held firmly to the poles of the mosquito net, waiting and watching for the stars to fall.

For several minutes, it seemed, there had also been a great swishing of water around the house—it was the water in the *klongs*, being tossed from side to side as if it were no more stable than a bowl of soup.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, the earthquake rocked itself out. As often happens it lasted only a few seconds,

but with everyone reckoning their feeling of time in minutes or hours. When it was over we all congregated on the veranda before going into chapel. People from outside came running to ensure that all was well, and with much relief we heard the news that the damage to Bangkok as a whole was very slight. There were, so far as I recall, no fatalities.

Reverend Mother led us into the convent chapel. I was still seeing the cotton trees in their wild dance.

Now we were all silent. It was Sister M. who first noticed that despite the minor wreckage which had taken place in our cells and most other parts of the house, the chapel remained serenely undisturbed. The figure on the Cross had not moved from its place. The statues of the Holy Virgin and others were all in position. There was no evidence of earthquake in the House of the Lord.

Chapter Four

The Heavenly Fastness

XIENG MAI, or Chiengmai as it is now sometimes called, is a hot, heavenly fastness in the northern hills of Thailand, an ancient capital city where a new convent was started by the nuns of Bangkok. After a spell of almost a year in Europe, to recover from a T.B. infection, I was sent back to Bangkok and then, soon afterwards, to work in the north.

It was at Xieng Mai that I came across Yasuko. She was fifteen years old, an orphan from Indo-China.

Yasuko was dark, moody, uncommunicative, a slimly-built girl of great beauty, with large, non-Oriental eyes that seemed to be for ever darting left and right as if searching among a crowd for some friend who never appeared.

Inside the convent classroom she was intelligent but patchy in her work, which was distinguished by bright bursts of energy alternating with phases of indolence and gloom from which nobody could shake her. Away from lesson periods she was athletic and often full of zest, yet always, noticeably, the odd girl out.

I knew her quite well, in so far as anyone knew Yasuko, although I was not her teacher. Together with Sister M., I was in charge of the kindergarten at the Xieng Mai convent, and I was also the official maker and mender of

the nuns' habits. Sometimes during recreation I would try to break through the mask of mystery that Yasuko habitually wore, but the effort was never strikingly successful.

Then came the dreadful day she tried to poison herself.

The class of older girls was just settling down in the morning under the guidance of Sister T., who began by informing Yasuko that the Reverend Mother wanted to see her. The girl rose from her chair and Sister T. turned her back on the class to begin writing on the blackboard.

Yasuko did not, however, make for the door. Instead, she bent down and produced a bottle from the little cloth bag she kept on the floor beside her desk. She pulled the cork, put the bottle to her lips, drank deeply, then collapsed with a scream that brought the whole school running to the room.

By the time Yasuko was being rushed to the hospital we knew only too well the name of the potion the bottle contained. The girl had swallowed at least four ounces of methyl salicylate, better known as wintergreen, which has among other ingredients a percentage of hydrochloric acid.

In *our* convent it was the first suicide attempt ever known, but we knew well enough that quite young children in other schools had tried, and occasionally succeeded—ending their lives with a fatal dose of wintergreen before the antidote could be administered.

Why did they do it? I was always shocked and saddened to hear of these tragedies, and thank God the attitudes which caused them have nowadays become virtually extinct. In the 1920s and through the 'thirties the practice was still frequently reported, and on the face of things it was nearly always a story of 'failure', which in the case of schoolchildren was a monstrous absurdity when you considered that an attempted suicide might result from nothing more serious than some temporary failure in classroom lessons. It was the least pleasant offshoot of the continual Buddhist

striving for 'merit'. In the case of Yasuko there had been a series of minor misdemeanours which had caused the nun in charge of her class to adopt a somewhat cold attitude towards the girl. By a coincidence the Reverend Mother, ignorant anyway of these faults, had intended to discuss Yasuko's future outside the convent school, and the child, expecting further reprimands, was stricken with fear on that grim morning. Happily, the attempt to kill herself was unsuccessful, thanks in part to speedy attention at the hospital, but also, probably, to the fact that a large bowl of rice she ate at breakfast that day had absorbed most of the poison.

The story of Yasuko was one among several missionary experiences which improved my understanding of the remoter workings of the mind and heart. The notion that love and hate are kindred or parallel emotions was no novelty; the real discovery was concerned with love and this sense of failure—a problem, one reflects, by no means exclusive to the peoples of the Far East—and the powers of the one to vanquish the cold insecurity of the other.

The lesson was further enhanced when into the classroom at Xieng Mai there came a new boy, Kiki, who was not quite three years old. For days on end Kiki was the embodiment of everything that is meant by naughty. Never was my patience more strongly tested. Kiki turned the afternoon siesta hour into a time of chaos for the entire kindergarten. He fought his companions, resisted sleep, refused to eat or play, tormented both babies and adults, and generally behaved in a fashion calculated to make life impossible throughout the community. Whether the treatment of the boy took the form of exceptional firmness or persistent affection, or a mixture of both, Kiki looked like an insoluble problem. And, as often happens, there was nothing particularly striking about the solution when it dawned.

It was not enough, I began to realize, either to demonstrate affection or to attempt imposing a discipline. What

turned Kiki into a peaceable and lovable child was the simple feeling of remaining close to a motherly figure, even though the mother was a twenty-seven-years-old innocent of the religious cloister, and over several weeks I made it my business to ensure that he was constantly aware of my nearness: sometimes sitting sewing beside him, sometimes being merely within hailing distance, and always contriving to look happy in his presence. Before long, Kiki was demanding to climb on my knee. After that it was a matter of days until he settled down, a changed personality, with the rest of the kindergarten.

The life at Xieng Mai did more, I imagine, to strengthen my affection for Thailand than any other factor. I arrived there in mid-1933 soon after returning from France where the Order had sent me to recuperate from my bout of tuberculosis, and I left Bangkok early one Sunday morning on the long rattling train-ride to the north. Once out of the capital the country was flat, covered by rice fields and palm groves for several hundred miles, but by dawn the next day I was being awed and occasionally terrified by majestic hills and steep ravines where the train seemed to totter at the brink. Whenever we stopped and the rattling carriage and engine noises subsided I could hear a chattering orchestra of birds and monkeys.

At Xieng Mai, which is a sizeable country town of the hills, I felt we were stepping back a hundred years by comparison with Bangkok. The mountains, thickly wooded, surrounded the place on three sides so that the valley had only a single entrance and exit. A river, the Meping, divided the town in half. Rickshaws went shakily through the streets; there were no buses and not more than a half-dozen automobiles. At one time the whole valley must have been an inland sea, judging by a variety of shells that are found close to the surface in the soil.

On one side of the river stood the American Protestant mission, with its well-established hospital, a leper colony,

schools, the railway station. On the other bank was the Catholic mission, with church, convent, school and college. Not far away were the bank, and the French and British consular buildings. There was also a small cinema showing archaic films.

There was a king of Xieng Mai, too, though by this time a king only in name and with a title not to be passed on to his descendants. Once the country had been a separate kingdom, then it was sold to the monarch of Siam. But in the north the old ruler still lived happily, unable to read or write, the last of his line and a cheerful, virile old character at that. He had countless wives, children and grandchildren and must surely have been the only monarch in the world to have been blessed with a grandchild and a future bride simultaneously attending a convent school, or any other school for that matter.

His bride was one of our older girls. She entered the king's household only a few months before he died, and produced his child a few months later.

Above all, Xieng Mai was the land of beautiful women and girls. Around Bangkok and indeed throughout Thailand the superb looks of the nation's womanhood could never be disputed; their fame is justly worldwide. But nowhere does beauty flower so brightly as at Xieng Mai, and in the old days before the national costume had given way to Western styles, there was nothing more pleasing than a morning walk through the streets when the girls were going to market. Their bright flimsy garments were always smooth and crisp, as though freshly laundered. The marvellous faces were pure and clean, the movements not merely those of dancers but of dancers in the role of mythical goddesses. Often I would watch them on their journey to the Wat, or temple. It was like standing in the middle of a summer garden where all the blooms were alive.

There was also at least one striking creature of beauty among the Europeans of Xieng Mai. She was our Yugoslav

Reverend Mother, one of the most lovable as well as the loveliest Superior I have ever set eyes on.

As a nun the Yugoslav Superior had been headmistress of the school at Bangkok, and some time later was appointed Reverend Mother of the convent in the capital. I was greatly devoted to her, was once given the task of nursing her when she fell ill, and found myself altogether heightened in grace, so to speak, by the association with a woman who was goodness, kindness, humility and holiness personified. However deeply she resisted the fact, it was hardly surprising that alongside her beauty, which was increased rather than dimmed by the religious habit and headdress, such attributes should have made her the 'rage' of the entire convent school.

These problems of personal affection are of course no new feature of the conventual way of life. At Xieng Mai and Bangkok, as in convents everywhere, particular friendships, attachments and the smallest signs of special affection are severely forbidden by The Rule. Except on a day of profession, or on the Clothing Day, nuns are not even permitted to touch one another.

Naturally one was drawn much more closely to one individual than to another, and I recall a valuable friendship I enjoyed with one of the young American nuns at Xieng Mai, although we never consorted outside the recreation hour. But if there were any examples of the comforts of mutual affection displayed between nuns, I certainly did not witness them. Doubtless there have been infringements of The Rule, for nuns are not saints—only frail women, as a French sister once put it, trying to be saints in the making. In any case the convent's weekly chapter of faults, at which one was bound to accuse oneself before Reverend Mother of failings against The Rule, would help to keep the weaker-willed among the nuns in check.

It is a point of some interest, I think, that a nun is also not permitted to touch a child with any mark of affection.

It was with a very jaundiced eye that one Reverend Mother at Bangkok gave me a severe reprimand after observing that some of the orphan girls who worked as my kitchen helpers were showing signs of a 'crush' towards me. These girls were in fact moved from their kitchen duties, and I was warned to keep a strict guard on a new batch to ensure that no hints of affection were allowed to creep in. I found the whole situation strangely sad. For one thing I could find no vice in the notion of patting an orphan girl's cheek when she worked well, or even taking her by the hands to perform a jig in sheer high spirits; for another, I hardly knew how to behave coldly towards girls who were, after all, roughly my own emotional and mental age. Nevertheless, in convent life The Rule is the law, the law is The Rule, and a Superior's command is both rule and law.

For the people of Thailand the years between 1932 and 1935 were a time of upheaval and social change. Absolute monarchy under the rule of King Prajadhipok, who later abdicated, was already coming to an end at the start of my first period of work in the Bangkok convent. There was in fact gunfire and shooting on the day I entrained for Xieng Mai. It was another salvo in the several *coups* which were leading to the formation of a new system of government, a form of democracy after a fashion, a brand-new constitution—and a new set of growing pains for the whole nation.

Thai troubles apart, these years also meant upheaval for me. After barely eighteen months at Xieng Mai convent I was recalled to the Bangkok community. In less than another year I was once more on the sick list, this time with a fairly serious form of septicæmia. With penicillin still no bigger than a gleam in scientific eyes, the illness became grave enough to threaten my survival, but after three or four weeks of a touch-and-go condition I was sufficiently recovered for a gentle convalescence. The

doctor gladdened my heart straight away by prescribing the cooler air of the north—cooler, that is, for the time of year—and this meant a return to the convent of Xieng Mai.

The train journey into the hills was only half completed when I was suddenly afflicted with sickness and pain. It was the start of a bad relapse. By the next down-train I was bundled back to Bangkok, there to learn that a further spell in hospital, lasting three months, lay ahead. It was a tiresome interlude, but when it ended I was once again despatched to Xieng Mai, where I was to stay until the New Year of 1939 when further illness, more months of hospital life, an unhappy return to England—and six years of war—were to change my fortunes even more radically than the Thais' revolution had changed theirs. Of these latter-day events, however, there were no possible clues during the comings and goings between Bangkok and Xieng Mai, where the work of the missions went on unabated through the only two seasons the country knows—wet and dry.

No one without first-hand experience of life in the tropics can begin to understand the nature of the heat, the humidity and the rain in territories such as south-east Asia. Although Xieng Mai enjoyed its cool months, in general the heat was far greater than down south. There were no trade winds as in Bangkok, for Xieng Mai lies in a basin where not a leaf would stir for weeks on end. Several of our nuns suffered severe burns on the bridge of the nose from the sun heat on their spectacles. Towels felt like cinders. The water in the cold tap would be too hot for hands to bear.

The rains began officially in May, continuing until November, but just before the rains broke the heat would be more oppressive than ever, and when the torrent did start to fall the earth was sometimes so dry and hot that for a while the rain would literally disappear in steam as it hit the ground. The downpour made such a din, too,

that around the veranda or near an open door the sisters had to shout to make themselves heard.

At Xieng Mai we were more often than not flooded out, for with almost no outlet to the valley, the river was in flood as soon as the waters came down from the hills. Often we would watch the floods approaching over the rice fields, though the first intimation we received was always from the worms. Like armies of nightmare invaders they emerged from the ground, and in seeking a place to hide they invariably came to rest under our doormats. This was a fearful sight, for there would be millions of them coiled together, long, slimy, white and endlessly wriggling.

Looking across the rice fields we could see the glint of sun on the water as it travelled its relentless path. And before long our own gardens would be engulfed. The floods usually meant that children and nuns were at one time or another marooned in one of the school buildings. Then Amat the gardener made rafts to carry their food over to them. We would also drag high-legged benches into the grounds so that we could walk on them precariously and move from one part of the convent to another without becoming soaked; but as a rule the benches had floated into the rice field by the following morning.

Only the ducks and geese seemed to be lovers of floods. Perhaps the frogs, though, were just as enthusiastic. During the rains they had a nightly gorging on the millions of flies that were drawn by the lights on the veranda. I shall never forget an evening at Xieng Mai watching a large toad who filled his stomach so full that there was no more room. Inflated but undaunted, he continued swallowing the insects and then began thrusting them far down into the transparent interior of his rear legs, a process I would never have believed feasible if I had not seen it happening.

After the floods, the flowers.

Thailand has nothing like so varied a selection of flowers

as England but at least there are many exotic varieties. These, plus the trees and shrubs, were an eternal joy. Roses bloomed almost the whole year through, though the average English or American rose-growing enthusiast would probably disdain the Thai roses which are small, ragged and always red. I doubt if they would disdain the gardenias, the Bangkok orchids, and the dozens of tropical flowers that lived and bloomed for only a single day.

About one drawback we were all agreed. A cumbersome religious habit was the most unsuitable dress imaginable for tropical countries. Often we would diffidently suggest to the Reverend Mothers that we would be better equipped with a totally different type of headdress, for the one we wore became so quickly sodden with sweat. When I first went to Bangkok we were dressed in the orthodox black habits, but those were heavy affairs that could not be washed even once a week, which was the minimum requirement in such a climate, and there was no doubt that it was sometimes possible to smell an approaching nun from several yards' distance. After three or four years, however, Reverend Mother won the battle we had waged for so long. She obtained permission for us to dress in white, not only at Xieng Mai but also in the community of Bangkok.

Our change of clothing caused a stir throughout the town. To us nuns it was just an overdue relief. We were also allowed two changes of costume each week. Arrayed in the cool white splendour, my first visit to Xieng Mai market place was a minor sensation. Everyone stared, and a young Thai girl asked her mother: 'Is it a man or a woman?' Both child and parent were surprised when I turned to answer for myself, speaking in Thai.

No one outside the conventual world, incidentally, can imagine the boon that the textile revolution of the last two decades has brought to the religious communities. Plastic guimpes (the bibs that are worn in front) came into

their own during the 1930s, and these could be sponged as often as we liked.

Despite the good progress I made with my studies of the Thai language I was often at a loss for . . . no, not words but tones of voice. This in fact is one of the most significant features of the Thai tongue. The language is composed in a tonal form (there are five or six different tones) and the same word spoken in these tones may have as many different meanings. There are also forty-eight consonants and twenty-eight vowels.

For the newcomer the difficult situations are always concerned with the tones. There is a high, a low, a heavy, a light, a long, a short, and it is quite impossible to express them on paper. To make matters worse, there are some words used only by men, others only by women. When a girl, for example, uses the word yes she will say 'ca'. And when a man says yes the word becomes 'crap'. Then there is a bewildering variety of words used for servants, superiors, equals, and yet another set of expressions for use when in the presence of royalty.

At the beginning I found that a good method of learning, apart from the Thai alphabet cards presented to me by the bishop, was in studying the signs and advertisements on the doors and windows of shops, for these were invariably written in English and Chinese as well as Thai characters. There was an added complication when I went to Xieng Mai, for there the language is that of the Laos people.

For a long time I had the convent girls and many a Thai citizen in stitches of laughter as a result of my blunders. In the kitchen or sewing-room, for example, I was always telling one of my girls to go and put the bishop on the fire. The same word is used for coal and bishop, one having a short sound and the other a long. In the same way the words stool, dog and horse presented enormous difficulties. Generally, however, the courteous Thai people would prefer not to understand when a foreigner used the

incorrect tone of voice. Years later, so it was said, I acquired an unusually good accent for a foreigner. At one stage I was on friendly terms with an aunt of the king's, and she delighted me by declaring that if her back were turned she might easily believe a native was talking when I was in good form.

Occasionally the language embarrassment could have more serious implications. At Xieng Mai one of our priests caught a severe cold and within twenty-four hours was feeling thoroughly ill. Deciding it was high time to call the doctor, the priest beckoned a boy servant and said, in what he thought was excellent Thai: '*By riek maw*' (Go and call the doctor). The boy frowned, saying he did not understand. The father repeated his order four or five times, and seeing his rising impatience, the boy trotted off.

A minute later he returned carrying a filthy saucepan which he laid on the priest's sickbed. The instructions uttered by the father could mean, according to tone, either saucepan or doctor.

Every year the Xieng Mai community moved up to the hills for a long vacation during the hottest weeks of summer. For months in advance we were hard-pressed to find a house or bungalow to accommodate us, but in the end something always turned up. Once we got the king's summer palace for the annual holiday. The next year we had to put up with little more than a large primitive hut. Most comfortable of all was the mountain summer house loaned to us by Mr. H., a British bank manager who eventually presented the place to the convent community. It was a fine house with a superb hill garden where he had planted two hundred rose trees that were flown out from England. Best of all, perhaps, he left us his gramophone and a wonderful collection of music on records.

The vacation weeks were not entirely plain sailing.

To obtain water at the summer house we had to walk into a small ravine with a rivulet running through it, the whole area covered by trees and tall grasses. One evening, ashen-faced, trembling, and with almost no voice left, Mother G., an Irish nun, walked into the dining-room to recount an unpleasant tale. She had walked towards the river, as she often did, to sit in a quiet spot under the trees where she liked to say her prayers. Not far from the water's edge she noticed on this particular day what seemed to be a gnarled tree-trunk, shaped to form a kind of natural swing, an ideal place to rest.

Stepping briskly forward Mother G. made for the spot, and was about to seat herself in comfort when suddenly the tree-trunk moved and trumpeted. It was the trunk of a rogue elephant which had been on the prowl for several days, had already done much damage to native huts and was assumed to have roamed farther afield than our holiday territory.

Almost as fantastic was a certain picnic day that same summer, when Reverend Mother, the nuns and a few of our girl boarders from the convent school went for an excursion into the mountains. Despite the rumour of a tiger loose in the vicinity, we decided not to cancel the picnic; but in view of the scare, Reverend Mother detailed Amat and Luko, our Thai gardeners, to act as guards and guides for the party.

We set out in the cool air of early morning, heading towards the mountain area called Doi Suthep. After a while we were compelled to walk in Indian file through tall grasses that reached almost to our heads. Amat was in front, Luko at the rear, both men armed with guns. Amat's large dog padded alongside.

We chattered incessantly, making jokes, though decidedly half-hearted ones, about the prospects of meeting the tiger face to face. Then, after climbing a steep rocky path, real nervousness set in. We were now among grasses so

high that it was impossible to see beyond the two or three nuns immediately ahead in the file. The grasses towered above us, their tips waving in a slight breeze, and it was all so dense that neither Amat nor Luko could have the smallest chance of detecting a lurking tiger if such a beast happened to be about.

Most of our girls, and I imagine most of us nuns, were plainly scared. I made my way forward and asked Reverend Mother if it might not be a good idea for Amat to fire his gun, which might at least frighten the tiger away if it were truly nearby. Reverend Mother agreed and gave the gardener his orders.

Amat was delighted with his chance to fire a few shots. The fact was that his finger had been itching for the trigger, merely for the sport of it, and probably he knew better than anyone that along the path we trod, there was little danger of wild beasts. Anyway, he fired several times and the report seemed more like a cannon than a gun.

The results for Reverend Mother were disastrous. Unaware that Amat's dog had moved through the grass to stand directly behind her, she took a sudden backward step and fell over the poor animal. Her scream of terror convinced us all that the tiger was upon us. Worse still, however, she was herself convinced that the brute was beneath her as she lay in the grass—and the shock was quite enough to bring on the heart attack that followed. The day ended in confusion. Somehow, with the help of the two men, we got Reverend Mother safely home and put her to bed. She recovered a few days later, and there was no more talk of tigers whenever she was within earshot.

As always, the feast days were a wonderful time of relaxation for the convent communities. But twice on these occasions a distinctly disgraceful scene was enacted—both involving nuns who became slightly tipsy.

I was one of the two offenders. It was a feast day when one of our Bangkok sisters had adventurously concocted

a home-made wine which turned out to be more potent than any of us bargained for. For some reason I had left my glass untouched all through the meal. At the end I sipped it and found the stuff obnoxious. Feeling as cheerful as the rest of them, however, I decided to drink it and I gulped down the glass in one long draught, reasoning that there was no need to prolong a penance on a feast day.

When Reverend Mother rang the bell for grace I tried to stand only to discover that my legs refused to hold. I flopped back in my chair and sat giggling all through grace. Nothing was said. The sisters tried their hardest to keep straight faces without much success. And when Reverend Mother passed between the tables on her way out, she merely leaned over and ordered me to sit still until such time as I had recovered.

On another feast day a visiting nun was in an even worse plight, for she consumed at least two glasses of the home-made brew and was more or less drunk and incapable. Her hilarity was passed off as high spirits, even by Reverend Mother. But the story was told again and again at evening recreations; as time went on I think the tale acquired a good many trimmings.

On at least one other occasion, a stiff dose of almost any brand of stimulant would probably have been welcomed to steady my nerves following a lonely vigil at the Xieng Mai hospital. It was a night when I was watching at the bedside of a certain Sister M., a poor ailing woman whose life was slowly ebbing and who died that same week. For a good many hours both before and after midnight I had sat by her bed, then suddenly realized that I must be at Mass in the convent chapel by 6 a.m. The convent was a long way off, across the river at the far side of the town, and failing a chance meeting with a rickshaw man there was nothing for it but to walk.

I had forgotten my watch, but set off at what I assumed must be roughly five o'clock. The dawn would be coming in

a matter of minutes, so I thought, and in the Far East it meant that daylight at this time of year would follow almost instantly.

I went more than a mile in darkness before I was aware how badly I had miscalculated the hour. On various parts of the lonely dirt road I saw bullock carts and their drivers, the latter fast asleep—except for one, who was astounded by the sight of a figure in ghostly white habit. Recovering quickly when I stopped and spoke, he told me it was barely four o'clock and warned me to beware of a village near the river where scores of pariah dogs would be prowling.

From that moment it became a walk of terror. Dogs in Thailand are for the most part a mongrel army foraging wherever they can for food and shelter. They tend to be unpredictable at the best of times, but in the middle of a night in remote hill country were liable to offer a pretty ferocious front towards lone strangers. It was common practice in many districts for the police to try poisoning stray pariahs in an effort to combat the constant danger from rabies.

It was too late to turn back, and anyway I dared not absent myself from Mass. So I stumbled on, dreading the entry to the village of dogs.

I was half-way down the street, feeling thankful for my good luck, and then all hell was let loose. From every hut and alleyway, and from the rocks and grass near the river, it seemed there were dogs swarming and howling towards me. Clutching my habit I ran as fast as I knew how, which was not very fast. Before long I was surrounded by dogs of all sizes, of every mongrel mixture. At one point there were three of the brutes literally hanging from the cloth of my habit as I continued the struggle to escape. Others followed snapping at my ankles, or leaping behind or before. For some reason I was mainly terrified for my hands, and tried to keep them folded inside my sleeves while I ran.

A few minutes later I was more or less free of them. At the edge of the village most of the horde grew tired of the chase, or perhaps were scared off by a trishaw driver who was providentially heading for Xieng Mai at that moment. Even as I clambered into the trishaw the last of the dogs managed to tear my cloak, then dropped back to join his mongrel gang. The Thai driver took me all the way to the convent doors. I had just enough time to wash and straighten myself before Mass began.

Chapter Five

The Soul Goes for a Walk

ON the blazing New Year's Day of 1937 (it was celebrated on 1st April), people near the market place of Xieng Mai turned to stare at the bedraggled nun with a broad smile on her face as she walked alone through the town.

I was the nun, unable to repress the smile while my thoughts dwelt on a certain strange comparison. First I was picturing the millions at home in England, sitting up till midnight at December's end for the familiar round of well-wishing, a style of New Year revelry I had never known. Then I recalled the scene at Xieng Mai a few minutes earlier that April afternoon, and the New Year habit to which I was now getting acclimatized. Five beautiful Thai girls, their bright *pah-nung* skirts drenched and clinging to shapely limbs, had come towards me bearing a huge silver bowl filled with water on which rose petals floated.

They began their greetings with an old Thai New Year custom—gently sprinkling a few drops of the water on my hands and face. And they ended with the boisterous modern method, emptying the entire contents of the silver bowl, which carried at least six pints, over my head and shoulders and newly-starched headdress.

By 1941 the Thais had adopted 1st January to open

their year, but before the Second World War it was always an April festival for which the fun began at least three days earlier. In Xieng Mai the celebrations were also notably religious—at any rate for a short while.

On the first day the more devout families went to the temple for prayers. Then they would take their ornate silver bowls to be filled with the water the priests had blessed, and on returning home the blessing of the family would take place. First the children blessed the parents, pouring water on their outstretched hands and upon the shoulders. Then the family would go out visiting relatives, friends and anyone for whom they had great respect, to perform the traditional rite once again. On the following days it was customary to administer the water blessing to all and sundry, even strangers in the street. By the third day the religious festival was disintegrating into a kind of civic free-for-all, a fantastic water-splashing pantomime where the chief idea appeared to be to determine who could throw the largest number of gallons at the greatest number of people. If you were irritated by this type of extrovert gaiety it was far wiser to remain at home. And it was not only the young people who enjoyed themselves. During another New Year journey into the market place, Sister J. and I were followed hundreds of yards by a wrinkled old woman who begged us to allow her to throw 'just a little water' on our persons.

'Just a little! Just a little! Just a little!' She repeated the refrain with such persistence that in the end we decided to give in.

'But take care it really *is* just a little,' I told her.

Her eyes gleaming, she stood in front of us about two paces away, lifted her bucket of water, and tossed the lot in our faces. We saw it coming and ducked, but failed to avoid the drenching.

In Buddhism generally and among Thai people in particular I found that a strange common factor, an element

of gay celebration, could be observed in the ceremonials surrounding festivals, weddings *and* funerals, though with the burial customs there was also just as much of the macabre about them as anything else. Disposal of the dead certainly produced some unexpected touches, and since our Xieng Mai convent stood directly opposite the open-air local crematorium, we had many an unsought opportunity to gain, if we wished, some insight into the rarer Buddhist practices.

Neither with Thais nor Chinese are there any scientific refinements in the business of cremation. The Xieng Mai crematorium, for example, was an open field with a large brick-built platform on which the wood pyres were erected for the reception of the coffins.

Four o'clock in the afternoon was the traditional hour for funerals, and often I would watch three different processions making their way to the field within a few hours. Sometimes the mourners would be few in number, at others there would be thousands congregating, plus dancers, a band, fireworks (to ward off Pee, the Devil), and all this was carried out with a rowdy, tearless display in which even young children would take part.

Widely different, incidentally, are the burial practices in north and south Thailand. Around Bangkok and the rest of the southern territory, the body of a dead person is kept for up to two years, in the house of the family if they are rich enough to spare, or build, a room, or possibly in one of the temples; and in the case of the poor, the burial would be more likely to take place somewhere near the temple. Even poor families would sometimes pay for the body to be placed inside the temple grounds, though I have also known these people to preserve a relative at home until the stench became unbearable, not only to themselves but to neighbouring houses. Embalming was more or less confined to royalty and the well-to-do. In the south, too, almost the first act after death was to bring on the musicians.

A tremendous noise is made, for they say that the soul 'has gone for a walk', and if it should return to find friends and families weeping it will indeed know that death has taken place. That, they declare, would without doubt cause the soul to be denied happiness, hence the great noise and fuss, sometimes with cheerful card games being played on the very lid of the coffin.

In the north, including Xieng Mai, the body is usually cremated on the day of death, the sole exceptions being those who die in violence or in childbirth—sudden death meaning a burial rather than cremation, which in Buddhist philosophy means a forfeiting of the right to reincarnation; the spirits of such uncremated bodies can never aspire to Nirvana, for the Buddhist holds that unless the body is cremated the soul must remain a wanderer and cannot be born again.

I confess to a feeling of fascination as well as horror on the day I attended, together with several of the sisters at Xieng Mai, the cremation of a former pupil of the convent school. Either the family was wealthier than we thought, or, what was more probable, was determined to spend nothing less than a small fortune for this special day.

Hundreds turned up, and from the house in the town we followed the coffin, which rested on a flower-laden cart drawn by girls from the dead child's class, to the cremation field. There, everyone sat while groups of dancers and musicians put on a lengthy performance. Few if any of the mourners seemed affected with sadness; there may have been tears from the closest relatives, but not many; they too believed that with cremation the soul would be set free to be born again.

For myself and the other nuns the first real shock occurred when the girl's body was removed from the coffin, borne aloft in an upright position and ceremoniously paraded before the assembled crowd. We were not expecting that. Nor were we expecting the next stage.

The body was placed on the ground for the final ablutions, a process performed by cracking a coco-nut over the face and letting the milk run out. The coco-nut was then thrown to the ground. If it broke in two pieces the soul had reached its proper degree of joy, but woe betide the soul if the nut should fall into three or more parts. Our former pupil, at any rate, was not tormented on that score.

Then the body was placed in a coffin which had a false base. This done, the coffin went on the pyre where the base was removed. A trail of gunpowder, already laid, was now lit, and no sooner had the powder flashed its path and set the central pyre ablaze, when wreaths, paper flowers and fireworks began to be thrown by the crowd. I was told later that even the bouquets had small blobs of gunpowder inserted in the flower petals to cause a bang. All these and similar noises were designed to prevent the Devil Pee from approaching too closely. It was not long, nevertheless, before the mourners themselves were disinclined to stay close. The odour of burning flesh came from the fire, and there was a hasty, undignified exit from the field.

Next day the family came once more, took the ashes that remained, and placed them together with the bones in a small urn. The urn was to be kept at home, or in the temple if they could afford to pay.

Although in the 1950s there has been much less talk of the Devil Pee, and much less attention given to ancient rites (the new westernized Thai liking to think himself vastly more go-ahead than his parents) nevertheless, it is not difficult to detect that many of the old basic fears are buried merely in the shallowest pits of memory. I have seen young Thai visitors to temples, for instance, looking blasé about all manner of customs, but taking no chances all the same, and striving for the Buddhist goal of merit just as their parents and grandparents had striven.

Occasionally one would see the truth of this when students from colleges in various parts of the country came to Xieng

Mai on a visit to one of my favourite Thai temples. Here was not only a fat statue representing the God of Study but also, in the temple compound, a set of large bells, the ringing of which gained merit for the worshipper. Most visiting students begin by ringing the bells for the fun of the thing, but many would return later, out of sight of sophisticated colleagues, to ring again with a noticeably more solemn purpose.

This temple, in its way almost as remarkable as Bangkok's Sleeping Buddha or Emerald Buddha, was erected in an astonishing position at the top of the hilly range called Doi Suthep above Xieng Mai. Its history was lost in fables, the best of them relating how some sage of long ago had placed the relics of the Lord Buddha in a casket fixed to the back of a noble white elephant. Wherever the elephant died, on that spot the man would build a temple.

Well, the elephant went to its grave on top of Doi Suthep. And somehow that temple was constructed—a feat of building by hand as wonderful as any I have seen. Leading to it are more than two hundred and fifty stone steps, their sides fashioned like dragons. Two giant yaks stand guard at the top of the stairway and an effigy of the original white elephant is facing it. I often went there with Xieng Mai sisters and convent girls, never ceasing to marvel at the vigour of the millions of devout pilgrims whose feet had worn a path to the site of the shrine. Yet more inspired, however, was a certain labour of love that began as recently as 1934. About that time a Buddhist monk, known locally as the Saint, issued an appeal for workers to build a road, and to give their services free. The idea behind this was to make it possible for the older men and women of Thailand to join the pilgrimages which up to that time were stiff going in the mountainous country.

The response was startling. It seemed that every Buddhist from Xieng Mai and many a distant province was coming to give help with the road construction. Joining the labour

gangs, alongside the men, were old women bent double by the weight of years and incapable of shifting the dirt with anything bigger or heavier than half a coco-nut shell. Many of these had young grandchildren at their side performing the same job and hugely enjoying it.

No machines were used. The road is still today needing constant repair, but it is a road where once there was none, a road broad enough for buses to pass with their loads of modern pilgrims.

It was a large shrine overlooking the valley. Along its outer courtyard were rooms where free temporary accommodation was available for anyone needing it. The inner courtyard was dominated by the *chadi*, a big circular structure of masonry, covered with gold leaf and coming to a point at its top, where a bell swings and rings whenever there is a breeze.

Buddhas of many kinds are to be found in the main temple nearby. And of course there is the fat-bellied Buddha in whose paunch lies all knowledge.

But the figure that intrigued me most was a statue to the Mother of Buddha, for this was where I saw some remarkable sights.

One after another, men and women were praying at this spot and then taking up a long, filthy wooden stick that was covered with small blobs of candle wax. The pilgrims, in turn, proceeded to outstretch their arms as if trying to measure or span the length of the stick. Then they dripped more candle wax, a blob at each end. Then they prayed a little more. Then they returned to the strange measuring exercise—and that was that.

Our party of Thai girls cleared up the mystery for me. The odd performance turned out to be a unique blend of faith, hope, wish fulfilment, and an occasional spot of plain cheating. The stick was a device for prayers to be answered. The first attempts at spanning the arms along its grimy length was just a preliminary check. The blobs of wax

were intended to measure the individual's stretch. Then came the prayer, which might be merely to gain extra merit or to ask the god some favour.

The second arm-span with the stick was the decisive effort. If on this attempt the hands can extend further than the wax blobs, your prayer will be answered and more merit acquired. The scope for childish deception—of the self if not of the Mother of Buddha—was all too obvious.

All in all, the temple was a truly exotic edifice in the complex pattern of Buddhist aims. During its road construction programme in the 'thirties, the Saint who conceived it was said to have spent his time reclining on a couch with a fan of devotion covering his head lest he be distracted or gaze upon the face of a woman.

Which brings me to the topic of marriages. In the old days it was the bride who did not look upon the face of the man who was to be her husband, not at least until the wedding day. Newer marriage customs have emerged to keep pace with the times, though I was fascinated to attend a Buddhist wedding (this was some years after I had ceased to be a nun) where much of the complex old ceremony was carried out. Three points are at once worth noting. First, the bride was as up-to-date an example of womanly emancipation as any to be found in the Far East; she was herself a doctor at work in Thai hospitals. Secondly, emancipation apart, the hour for the invitations had been fixed by the local astrologer, who worked out the most propitious time for the wedding. Thirdly, Buddhist monks had spent the morning praying for the couple.

Dr. A. was an old friend, but it was a long time after the ceremony began before I was able to catch a glimpse of her. When I arrived there was already a lengthy queue of guests waiting to pour the blessed water on the hands of bride and groom. When, finally, I reached the room, the scene was enchanting. Dr. A. and her husband were reclining, traditionally, on a wide couch. A single thread of

unbleached cotton was wound around the two heads so that the pair of them were literally joined together. Their right and left hands were also tied with the thread, and it was over these joined hands that we poured the water. A silver bowl was on a table beneath the linked wrists, and a conch shell lay beside it for each guest to scoop out a little water. Rose petals floated in the bowl. Dr. A., looking wonderfully happy, had made one departure from tradition that brought a lump to my throat. She was dressed as an English bride, all in white and with a lace-trimmed veil.

With so many guests taking part, the water ceremony lasted hours. Only when it was ended could wife and husband descend from their throne-like couch. They had looked so graceful in their reclining pose, but it was an awkward one to maintain and both were badly cramped when they rose.

After that, it was all on sociable, almost European lines, with the milling crowd of guests and families sampling the cake and congratulating the happy pair.

Whether the bride on this occasion would have appreciated the seven categories of wifely conduct that were enumerated by one of the ancient Siamese sages, I have no idea. The philosopher's descriptions, if somewhat prejudiced, are certainly worth seeing and I cannot resist including them here.

The list runs as follows:

Some wives are to their husbands like a younger sister. They look to their husbands for approving smiles as the reward of their kind and affectionate forethought. They confide in him and feel tenderly towards him. And when they have once discovered the wish, the taste, and the ideas of him whose approval they respect, they devote themselves thoughtfully and assiduously to the realization of his desires. Their own impulsive passions and temper are kept under strict control lest some hasty word should mar the harmony of their union.

Some wives are to their husbands like an elder sister. They watch sedulously their husband's outgoings and incomings so as to prevent all occasion for scandal. They are careful as to the condition of his wardrobe and keep it always in order for every occasion. They are diligent in preserving from the public gaze anything that might impair the dignity of their family. When their lord and master is found wanting they neither fret nor scold, but wait patiently for the time when they can effect a reformation in his morals and lead him towards the goal of upright manly conduct.

Some wives are to their husbands like a mother. They are ever seeking for some good thing that may bring gladness to the heart of the man for whom they live. They desire him to be excellent in every particular, and will themselves make any sacrifice to secure their object. When sorrow or trouble overtakes them, they hide it away from the eyes of whom they love. All their thoughts centre round him, and they so order their conversation and actions that in themselves he may find a worthy model for imitation. Should he fall sick, they tend him with unfailing care and patience.

Some wives are to their husbands like a common friend. They desire to stand on an exactly equal footing with him. If ill-nature is a feature in the character of their husbands, they cultivate the same fault in themselves. They will quarrel with him on the slightest provocation. They meet all his suggestions with an excess of carping criticism. They are always on the look-out for any infringement of what they deem their rights, and should the husband desire them to perform any little service for him, he must approach the subject with becoming deference or their refusal is instant and absolute.

Some wives wish to rule their husbands. Their language and manners are of a domineering nature. They treat the man as if he were a slave, scolding, commanding, and forbidding with unbecoming asperity. The husbands of such women are a miserable cringing set of men.

Some wives are of the robber type. Their only idea in getting married is the possession of a slave and the command of a purse. If there is money in the purse they are never satisfied until they have it in their own grasp. Such wives generally take to gambling and staking money in the lottery, or purchasing useless articles. They have no care as to where the money comes from or by whose labours it is earned, so long as they can gratify their own extravagant and ruinous fancies.

Some wives are of the murderess type and these possess a revengeful temper. Being malicious and fault-finding, they never appreciate their own homes and families, and are always seeking sympathizers from outside. They share their secrets with other men, using their alleged domestic discomfort as a cloak for their own vice and an excuse for their greatest misdeeds.

In modern Thailand, as in Western Europe and the United States, the philosopher's seven types are doubtless just as easily recognizable as ever they were.

Chapter Six

Renunciation

Not far from the convent at Xieng Mai, the road leading towards the Temple of the White Elephant was rocky and treacherous. One day in 1938 it also became a bitter symbol, a stony pathway that led to the beginning of the end of my life as a nun.

I was out walking with Sister J., the young American, and a party of our convent girls. We had set off early in the morning and long before noon were enjoying a picnic lunch in a tree-shaded hollow away from the summer heat. On the return we came to a place where it was necessary to climb a kind of escarpment leading directly to a boulder-strewn track, which in turn brought us to the final stage of our homeward journey where the going was easier.

Dressed in clumsy habits it was no simple matter to clamber over the rocks, but on this hot afternoon we managed it without mishap until I, bringing up the rear of the column, reached the top of the escarpment.

There I stumbled and fell, giving a cry that brought Sister J. and the girls running to my aid.

I had crashed heavily, the base of my spine receiving a nasty blow on a jutting rock. For five or ten minutes it was agonizingly painful, but after a little fussing and self-applied massage the ache decreased and we went on our way.

We were entering the convent gardens when I began feeling sick and feverish. Next day the pain had returned, my temperature was well above a hundred degrees—I also had a filthy headache, and was told my condition would mean resting in bed for at least a week.

There followed months of unsettlement, with a series of aggravating relapses, recoveries and further relapses. By the new year of 1939 I was being despatched for a three-weeks' investigation to the American Protestant mission hospital. It was clear that some type of spinal injury had been caused by the fall in the mountains, and at one stage a lengthy test was carried out to see whether there might also have been some injury to the brain. In the end nothing very definite was confirmed by way of diagnosis, and towards midsummer I was ordered back to Bangkok for yet another wearisome medical probe, this time at the French sister's hospital in the capital.

Before leaving Xieng Mai I had several opportunities to observe and admire the varied work of the American Protestant mission carried on in the mountain territories.

The Americans had certainly made a marvellous job of their hospital and of the Xieng Mai leper colony not far away. The hospital, begun some twenty-five to thirty years ago, had been at first a mere shelter without walls, a place where patients were bedded down on the floors. Now it was a modern institution with good buildings and a top-grade training school.

The leper colony was perhaps more remarkable. Built on a small island in Xieng Mai valley, it was an idyllic-looking place with shady walks that were packed with trees, shrubs and flower-beds. The colony could accommodate four hundred lepers—a brave but still too slight effort in a land where the afflicted are numbered in thousands. The fortunate dwellers on the island live in sunshine-washed cottages, two inmates to a house, with flower gardens in front, vegetables and chicken runs at the rear. There are

two hospitals for men, one for women, recreation centres, a big variety of workshops—even their own police force and their own coinage. The Americans had had plenty of experience in such methods of organization, for their mission was set up in Xieng Mai almost a century ago.

For myself, the time was fast running out—just as it was running out for Europe and the nations who were on the brink of a second world war. Absurd and fantastic as it now seems, I was unaware of all the turmoil that stemmed from Nazi Germany. In the weeks preceding September 1939, I was concerned only with my endless headaches and sickness, and above all with the overpowering fear that I might be sent away from Siam.

The blow fell in July. The doctors at Bangkok had given me another prolonged examination, the results of which were communicated to Reverend Mother. She called me to her room, announcing flatly that I was now to sail for Europe and receive my further instructions from the headquarters of the Order in Paris. From France I would almost certainly travel at once to England, she added; and as I left the room I felt convinced that I would never again set eyes on Bangkok, or Xieng Mai, or the temples, Buddhas, serpents, mosquitoes and the gentle Thai people.

My last evening was spent sitting on the veranda of the Bangkok convent which was a place of such poverty when I entered it eleven years before. Now the debts were paid off, the school was beginning to thrive, the sisters were busier than ever. Two youthful newcomers had just arrived, both of them girls with bright eyes, feeling perhaps what I had once felt, looking to the peace of a new cloister. And at thirty-three I was on my way out, feeling only bitterness and looking towards I knew not what. I had even had the temerity to argue about the medical decision that caused my recall, but the doctor's word, like the word of a Superior, was law. I could find no joy, no hope for the future, no

hope even of a future, as I sat alone in a creaking cane chair and gazed in gloom towards the convent lawn.

An odd element of satisfaction was derived from an incident that took place as the twilight deepened. Suddenly I noticed on the grass a few yards away, a snake about a yard in length, its raised head slightly swaying. There was something distinctly queer about its behaviour and I discovered the answer a moment later. Squatting on a branch of a low bush was a sparrow. Thirty seconds earlier it was chirruping. Now it was mesmerized by the serpent.

Slowly, so slowly, the snake crept towards the bush. Then the sparrow dropped from its branch and hopped two feet nearer to its doom.

The poor creature was transfixed. From where I sat it was possible to see the terrified quivering of the bird's tiny frame.

Then there was a darting, flashing strike from the snake, and the sparrow was in its mouth.

I jumped from my chair, picked up a length of sawn-off plank that lay against the veranda rails, stepped quickly on to the lawn and began beating the life out of the preying snake. Half-a-dozen times I must have struck the thing, and no one could have been more surprised than I was when suddenly the little sparrow was disgorged. It fell from the snake's jaws, lay still on the grass for only a few moments, then miraculously flapped and fluttered and shook itself and flew off. The snake was motionless at my feet.

I was vaguely shocked at the thought of the venom which had gone into my attack on the creature. Perhaps I too felt threatened, though there were certainly no conscious ideas of making myself free as I went through the motions of gaining the sparrow its unexpected freedom.

Trapped, numbed, altogether without hope, I sailed for Europe the next day.

Despite the depression that hung over the weeks of the homeward voyage, sea air and sunshine and salt breezes did

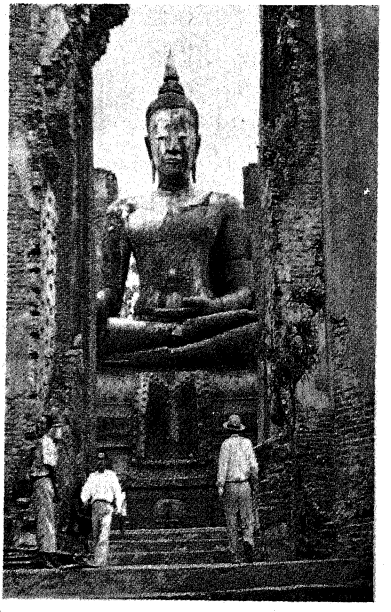
The author at the time of leaving her first convent in London for Siam

Probationer nurse, a photograph taken at the age of thirty-six

St. Joseph's maternity hospital, Bangkok, which the author helped to found

The King's uncle, Prince Dhani, officiating at the first diploma ceremony at the hospital in Bangkok

A group from the pre-nursing school going up the steps of the famous temple of Nakorn Prathom



The great Buddha at the temple of Nakorn Prathom

quite a lot to restore me physically. In fact I was driven with some reluctance to admit that by the time I reached Paris I was feeling fitter than for almost a year. My stay at the French convent was brief, just long enough to collect a letter instructing me to take the boat for Dover, where an English nun would be waiting to escort me to a convent on the Kent coast. It was almost the end of August.

I met the nun as arranged and reached Westgate-on-Sea in time for supper in the convent refectory, a meal of thinly-sliced mutton and potatoes which I hardly touched.

Immediately after supper I had a short, curt interview with the Reverend Mother, whose attitude seemed cold and unwelcoming. It was not long before I began wondering, as she obviously wondered, whether indeed I must have been 'sacked' by the Bangkok convent—guilty of some fearful felony against The Rule, serious enough to warrant my recall from the missions. As for my story of illness, it might well have looked pretty thin to the onlooker who saw only a sunburned face and a generally healthy air following the sea voyage from the East.

The days dragged on, as, interminably, did my headaches and general *malaise*. The declaration of war on 3rd September came to me with a tremendous shock. I doubt if I had glanced at a newspaper more than half-a-dozen times since the year 1928. There were newspapers in Bangkok but they were read mostly by the Reverend Mothers, who informed the sisters of any news that might seem to our Superiors to concern us. Catholic newspapers were also available in the convents, and all nuns were permitted to read these, but since I was never at any time politically minded I barely understood half that was printed about world affairs. We were far away from Europe, and although the names of Hitler and Mussolini were known to me, their deeds and the implications of the rise of Fascism meant virtually nothing to my confined and uninformed mind.

After a doleful year at Westgate I was sent to a convent in south-west London, and from there to a more enjoyable life for the next six months, on the Cornish coast, caring for evacuee children who were sent from London to Newquay.

There were two hundred children, and lessons went on in all kinds of outlandish classrooms ranging from disused garages to air-raid shelters. We lived in a pretentious hotel with a mock-Tudor façade, but at least it faced the sea-front. We rose at 5 each morning and were taking brisk walks by 5.30. The food was poor, and atrociously served even by the low standards of wartime mass catering.

By the end of 1941 I was being moved yet again, this time back to London, and into—of all places—the convent I had first entered as a girl of sixteen.

New buildings had appeared since my departure for the missions. The old régime was altered, more in keeping with the times. The old Superiors were both dead.

One thing was unchanged: the tulip tree on the lawn. It brought an echo of the childhood novitiate that made me weep. Yet among the developments in conventual living, the one that struck me with greatest force was a simple question of taking baths. Throughout my years as a novice in London we were permitted no more than one bath each week. In addition it was considered highly unmortified to expect hot water for washing oneself either night or morning, just as it was also unmortified to want hot water bottles even during the coldest of winter spells. In some convents there were certainly those among the older nuns who did not take a bath oftener than twice a year.

In all these spheres the convents had undergone a major revolution. Hot water was now a commonplace; we were allowed a daily hot bath if we wished it; it was a privilege for which I regularly thanked God.

Several new bouts of illness served only to deepen the

despondency that had grown ever since the day I sailed down the Chao Phya bound for England.

By the summer of 1942 I was facing—for the first time and with great terror in my heart—the thought of renouncing the religious life.

One day I confided this misery to the Reverend Mother. Her reaction, doubtless sincere, was unhelpful, for she regarded my unhappiness as a temptation to be resisted.

'This spirit of misery,' she said, 'comes only from the Devil. You must think of it as a temptation. And you must strive to overcome it as with all other temptations.'

Over the next few weeks I even tried to see the dilemma in this light. In the hope that God would restore the joy I had once felt in His service, I performed yet more penances and prayed a great deal more often.

I think it is impossible, however, to convey the panic I felt during these weeks. I went sleepless most nights, and once, having dozed off and then wakened in fear, I got up from bed, crept along the corridor and made my way to a bathroom where I knew a pair of nail scissors was kept in a cupboard.

I stood in the poor light of the dawn, and without the aid of any mirror I then cropped my entire head more closely than ever before. Taking tufts of hair between two fingers I clipped it all over, close to the scalp, until the total effect must have been utterly hideous. By making myself such a sight that I would never dare to be seen in public I reasoned the danger to be faced by a renunciation of my vows would be at least temporarily warded off. The effects of such wild hair-cutting are not to be underestimated, and when I nowadays consider the low spirits engendered in most women when they feel an acute need for nothing more elaborate than a shampoo and set, I shudder at the mental picture of my crude nocturnal barbering.

This much was certain. The nun whose days began to be spoiled by gloom and discontent was no good follower of

the religious life. Peace and inner happiness are basic conditions for the life of prayer and service. The most acute forms of illness and physical pain can be endured, and are often endured, when the highest degrees of inner calm have been achieved. Lacking the calm, all is lost.

To this day I cannot be altogether certain of the reasons that led to my renunciation. When this book came to be written, one of my friends who subjected all my notes to a searching analysis produced a suggestion which may have hit the nail on the head.

Bluntly she asked, in a letter: 'Were you, perhaps, subconsciously in rebellion for the simple reason that you could no longer serve in *your* way? A rebel because you found it impossible to serve in *their* way—if that meant a denial of all your most compelling desires for active service as a worker in the foreign missions? A rebel because you knew your life among the Thai people—despite illness, despite hardship, poverty and lack of creature comforts—was the personal method of serving God that gave *you* your deepest feelings of calm and satisfaction? A rebel because the return to England would mean, in contrast to the active life, a more negative form of striving after perfection? I put it to you that prayer, however vital and fundamental, was no longer enough, and that for you the religious life had to go hand in hand with religious work—on behalf of human beings whose problems you could see, human beings among whom you could feel the nature of God's eternal love. . . .'

I went once more to Reverend Mother, with a request that I should be allowed to join an altogether new Order, preferably a nursing Order with duties in foreign missions. The answer was an unyielding no. I then asked to see a priest with whom, apart from the priest who regularly heard our confessions, I could discuss my problems. Again the answer was negative. It began to look like a hopeless conflict of wills, and over the next few days there was undoubted strain between us.

At last I could stand it no longer. I asked to be taken to visit the Pope's delegate in London, and although the final decision was not yet firm in my mind I could see no other way out.

In normal times any request by a nun to be released from her vows would be despatched to Rome, but as we were now in the midst of war these problems were handled by the apostolic delegate, who happened to be a bishop living a short distance from the London convent.

In the company of Reverend Mother and one of her assistants I went to the house and was ushered into the presence of His Eminence. Throughout the journey the only prayer of which I had been capable for weeks past was all the time on my lips. 'Help me, Lord, to do what is right.'

I recounted briefly the story of my years in the East, the impact of my various illnesses, the sense of deprivation I felt at my recall, and the strains which ever since had built up to a state of such unhappiness that I no longer thought it possible to remain in the cloister. He listened patiently, then asked what type of work I felt impelled to undertake. Without hesitation, and despite my limited knowledge of what it entailed, I told him I would gladly be a nurse. He was silent for a long time, then said: 'My child, I believe you have suffered considerably. But I would like you to return to the convent for two more weeks. Meditate, and pray about all this. Talk also with the priest. And return to me at the end of that time if your mind is unchanged.'

Oddly enough, a new priest was at the convent a day or two later to hear our confessions. I grasped the opportunity to repeat the whole sorry story, and when I had done I was almost amused by his response.

'I think, my child,' he said, 'that you are a round peg in a square hole. It may be better for your life to change that situation.'

It was as if a weight had been lifted from my heart—

though not in such fashion as to make it glad. Rather was I drained of all feeling.

So, for the second and last time, I went to the big quiet house where the Pope's delegate heard me out again.

From that interview, after a formal short speech that released me from my vows, I came away a 'secular'—a nun in dress only.

Reverend Mother escorted me in silence back to the convent. It was nearly lunchtime. She instructed me to have my meal, then to collect some 'civilian' clothes from one of the sisters, and to call upon her in her own room before leaving.

After lunch—the last meal I would ever consume while dressed in the religious habit—I went to the chapel. Kneeling, I dedicated the future, in whatever shape it lay, to God. I prayed again that I might continue to work in the service of the Lord, and asked forgiveness for this act of casting aside such grace. I remember also uttering the plea that discontent would surely mean doing harm to God's work rather than good, adding the hope that I should henceforward be guided away from the perils of carrying on my life along selfish paths.

The time was approaching. I went to a room where a nun handed me four items of clothing. It was an outfit as dull and unfashionable as was possible to achieve, yet in my eyes it might as well have been some strange native costume of another age.

There was a plain dark blue jumper, a plain dark grey skirt, a blue beret and a 'utility' raincoat.

I walked up the long flights of stairs to my cell and took off my habit. The nun's underclothing was to remain in my possession. So were my thick black stockings and black shoes. I dressed myself in the skirt and jumper, jammed the beret over my unattractive clipped hair, then went to Reverend Mother's office for the final interview.

She looked at me with some distaste. This was a moment

of shame, if anything, for the whole convent. I felt like a criminal.

She then handed me five pounds in one-pound notes. These, and the outfit I stood in, were my total resources after twenty years of the cloistered religious life.

'Good-bye,' she said, without feeling. I said good-bye and was almost at the door when I remembered the last act, which even Reverend Mother had forgotten.

I took off my ring, that glorious symbol of the marriage with God, walked over to the desk avoiding her eyes, and placed the ring on the leather-bound blotter that lay in front of her. She said no more. Neither did I.

I walked slowly to the street. It was the end of October 1942. The foliage of the tulip tree was all golden again.

Somewhere out in the deserts where the world war was fought, a battle called El Alamein was going on. But I knew nothing of this or any similar matters. At that moment it was enough of a battle to find my way to a London bus stop and ride alone to my sister's flat at Streatham.

Chapter Seven

Probationer in Living

WITH the convent doors shut behind me (and with what a frightening finality they echoed) I found the bus stop, boarded the vehicle with a faint sense of nervous excitement as I fumbled with the money in my purse, and eventually reached my sister's home. Entering the flat it seemed as if I had felt all I was capable of feeling, and after long months of indecision I was now merely empty and stunned.

The first few days were lonely and altogether lacking in the freedom which one supposes a newly-released nun might begin to marvel at. There was in fact no sense of release at all. Instead, the London suburb and the flat itself became a kind of strait-jacket fastened on a shy unworldly personality.

My sister Edna, who worked as an accountant in a London office, did everything possible to help my adjustment to the new régime, but since she was out of the flat early each morning and did not return from her job till evening, my days at Streatham were spent alone.

During the first week I rarely left the flat. Venturing two or three times as far as the local shops to buy bread and groceries, I felt unbelievably stupid, knowing nothing about the prices of foods or any other merchandise, never being quite sure if I should proffer a half-crown or a pound

note, and having a general terror of facing the ordinary chores of living in wartime England.

How can I explain it? Simply by acknowledging that one cannot change the habits of an unorthodox lifetime in a few days? There is more to it than that. For twenty years I had depended on others. The cloistered missionary may at times have to be resourceful but on the whole she requires none of the commodity called initiative. Above all, she takes no real decisions, great or small. Now I was being forced into a daily round of decision-taking. Where to walk, what bus to take, which street of shops, what to buy, what to eat, how to cook it when carried home, and so on. And for a time each of these was a matter of vast worry and confusion.

No less troublesome was the problem of clothes. I was probably one of the few women to whom wartime coupons and rationing brought little or no sense of feminine deprivation. I had not the smallest inklings of style and fashion, so I was thoroughly content with the dresses and coats restyled for me by my sister after ransacking her own wardrobe. Nevertheless, a new hat, some underwear, an extra skirt and a few other items were soon seen to be essentials on the shopping list, and whenever possible I would wait for my sister to accompany me on these expeditions. We bought some remnant dress-lengths. We also bought my first brassière.

Selection of the 'bra' was quite an ordeal. The fact was that I did not know, and had never known, my bust measurement. The salesgirl in the lingerie department thought me merely daft as she passed the tape-measure around me. Yet what could I say: that we nuns did in fact wear a kind of brassière under the religious habit, but that they were not like the modern versions, that they were home-made and rather shapeless, designed to compress the breasts and hide the curves of the figure. My wild groping for an explanation was rapidly dismissed.

A more comic note crept into the purchase of my first

hat, which I adventurously decided to choose alone and without sisterly guidance. After a long spell of window-gazing I went into a shop, tried on various styles, and was soon so confused that I was mentally paralysed for the actual choice. To me, a hat was no more than a head covering, yet there was something more than mere protection in all the fanciful shapes I was examining in the mirror. I suppose my chief motive was to conceal rather than enhance my head, for the hair was still in appalling condition and nowhere near recovered from the desperate mutilation I gave it on that dark night of indecision in the convent when I hacked it away with blunt scissors.

Standing there in the shop I decided, after fiddling with at least a dozen hats, that a certain neat blue velour which I pulled forward and slightly to one side of the brow, seemed vaguely to suit my face. But by this time I was full of doubts, and I came home without it to await my sister's return from work. Next day, a Saturday, she went with me to the shop, stood by while I modelled the blue hat, and then gave a loud but sympathetic laugh.

It appeared my choice was exceptionally chic and very much the latest thing—except that this hat, instead of being pulled forward, should have been perched far back on the head. Highly amused, we bought it and came away ironically praising my 'flair' for spotting fashionable millinery. Anyway, I wore the hat on Sunday at church, where I was agreeably surprised by the size of the congregation and the numbers attending communion. The world was at least in some small ways less wicked, or more devout, than I had often assumed it to be.

Generally, my judgements were somewhat remote from reality. In years I was a woman approaching middle age. In experience I was less secure than any adolescent village girl facing the big city for the first time in her life. And in outlook as well as appearance I was also more akin to a girl in her twenties than to a mature woman.

Two unexpected sources of comfort and relaxation emerged during these first nervous weeks in London. One was the sheer physical enjoyment of taking hot baths at leisure and in comparative luxury, with large well-aired towels, scented bath salts and all. A convent bathroom was a doleful place, without gadgets, and quite bare save for a bathtub and a wooden chair.

The second great boon and consolation was radio. I found that I could listen all day to music and talks, plays and news bulletins, and the symphony concerts in particular were a new and exhilarating pastime. An odd twist to this enjoyment was that I found it difficult to sit in an armchair during my hours of listening. I was quite unaccustomed to fireside comforts, so would leave the radio switched on while I walked about the flat or busied myself in the kitchen. To this day, one trite and sentimental song sticks in my memory. Judy Garland singing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' was among the most frequently played performers in the broadcase programmes of records.

But I was not long in London. There were many discussions with my sister about what type of career I might usefully pursue, and just at the point when we agreed that nursing might be worth a try, an unexpected emergency arose in the illness of my eldest sister, Phyllis, who lived near Sheffield where I was born.

So I packed my bags and took the train for Sheffield to set about the task of nursing Phyllis, who had undergone a serious operation and was just then being discharged from hospital.

It was strange returning to Sheffield and seeing the badly bombed city. As a child I had known only fields around the district where my sister and her family now lived. Away on a hilltop we used to see the castle in which Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned. Now the whole area was built up with houses, and the castle could no longer be seen. My sister and her husband, Arnold, had a delightful house.

Their children were grown up, a son with the army in the Far East, a daughter with the land army in England.

Thanks to Phyllis, whose recovery was fairly rapid, I was making one more important move before the year was ended. As a Red Cross commandant she was well acquainted with the hospital and health services of the region, and as soon as she was well enough to venture into the city we went to visit her old matron, hoping that despite my age the hospital would agree to accept me as a probationer for training.

Before Christmas I was installed in the nurses' home, starting my lecture course and learning my duties as a first-year beginner around the wards.

The Sheffield hospital was an up-to-date institution. Matron had a few qualms about accepting a student nurse of thirty-six, but perhaps my enthusiasm and youthful looks helped to soften any resistance. She was one of the old school for whom age had rubbed off a good many sharp edges, and instead of the proverbial bitter old maid she was wise, kindly and as a result well-liked throughout the hospital.

The nursing régime fitted me like a glove. The all-pervading regimentation of hospital life was not so far removed from the regimentation of the cloister; as a student nurse there was the same blend of hard labour and freedom from major responsibilities; and always, as in the convent, the emphasis upon rank and precedence played a great part in the day-to-day conduct of affairs.

Despite the big difference in ages, I got on well with most of my probationer classmates, although I think word went around that I was once an inmate of convents and in various small ways I was looked on with a certain amount of curiosity.

Both matron and the sister tutor also seemed to take to me, probably because of my willingness to tackle all the less pleasant jobs of nursing, from bed pans onwards, without fuss. Perhaps my whole attitude towards bed pan duties was

determined, however, by an unexpected scene in the ward during my first week. I had delivered a bed pan to a woman patient who asked for the screen, and returning later I nearly burst my sides with laughter. The pans were gleaming metal affairs known as 'everbrite' or some such name, and the woman, with hers propped on her knees, was using it as a mirror while she made up her face and tidied her hair for the visitors' hour.

Several months elapsed before I grew accustomed to the noise of chattering voices and modern slang. I was thankful for having my own room to which I could retire, for years of silence in the cloister had one undoubted effect, for good or ill: a total inability to tolerate small talk over long periods.

During lectures and examinations there was the occasional superb howler from one student or another. A young Welsh girl, for example, once announced in answer to a question: 'The fallopian tubes are found in the middle ear.' Quick off the mark, the doctor told her: 'Yours must have slipped a bit.' I can also vouch for a story that may well sound apocryphal. More nurses than one would imagine were in the habit, at any rate during my day, of calling the auroscope (the instrument for examining ears) a horoscope.

After a few months a new range of experience was opened. I was moved from a general female ward to an all-male ward, and I imagine the reason was largely because I had what matron termed no nonsense about me. Certainly some of our more flighty girls—probationers who were in nursing for no better reason than that it was a form of war service preferable to factories or the armed forces—were oddly self-conscious when dealing with men. One student nurse, attempting to invest even her carrying of a urine bottle with some dignity, used to transport the bottle on a tea tray around the ward. All the same, it was no blasé factor in my own case that allowed me to strip and blanket-bath a male patient without embarrassment. Although twenty years older than most of

my colleagues, and although I'd been half-way around the world, I was ignorant and artless as well as immature. Fundamental biological differences between men and women still meant little or nothing to my mind, and I doubt if it is an exaggeration to suggest the theory that at that stage I could have slept serenely untroubled in the same bed alongside a man—the element that would have chiefly repelled me being a sense of propriety, and of æsthetics, on an altogether non-sexual plane.

There was no doubt that every single activity of ordinary living came to me like some strange or exotic taste or smell. From today's distance it seems absurd to describe the sense of wonderment I felt at such mundane experiences as attending my first hospital dance, my first cinema, my first attempts at making-up my face, and so on; but at the time each such action had considerable impact. At the hospital dances, I must add, it was rare for me to take the floor, even though I had gone to the trouble of having dance lessons from a local teacher. I got tremendous enjoyment out of watching the others, but the legacy of my childhood trauma concerning the shape of my legs still gave me a self-consciousness I have never lost.

In other ways, however, I was much less inhibited. One day we put on a fête to raise money for war savings, and on that afternoon I went enjoyably through several hours of systematic perjury—dressed as a fortune-teller from the east. I was masquerading as a certain Rani of Tahore, covered in a sequin-trimmed *sari* with a veil over my face. The entire hospital staff were kept in ignorance of my identity till the end.

As for the cinema, the chief recollection of reactions to my first Hollywood film was boredom to the point of sleep. I'd heard so much about films and was filled with disappointment. How unlike real life, how infantile at times, and how embarrassing to watch the drawn-out kissing of screen lovers.

Throughout my probationer days, too, odd situations often came about as a result of my guileless honesty in con-

versation, together with a tendency to take everyone, and everything that was said to me, at their face value. Convent life had left me with a *naïveté* which I found difficult to eradicate. My speech was so simple and direct that people tended to see double meanings everywhere, believing that such artlessness could not be unintentional.

'I *always* say what I mean, and mean what I say,' I protested in the dining-room one evening, and a few minutes later I was regretting this dogmatic declaration.

'Why don't you get married, Lightwood?' asked one of the nurses.

'I've no time,' I replied innocently. 'I've been neglecting my anatomy revision quite long enough.'

When the laughter subsided the girl went on: 'It's high time you had a husband. Surely you'd like to make some man happy?'

I plunged on regardless. 'Why should I waste time making *one* man happy,' I said, 'when there are so many in great need?' Useless to explain that my thoughts were all with the millions of suffering humanity who were the victims of poverty and war, and it took me a long time to live down the *gaffe*.

There was also the episode of Marco, the Italian war prisoner who for decidedly unromantic motives was in the habit of proposing marriage to me.

The prisoner-of-war camp stood next door to the hospital. When the men were ill they were sent into our wards and at one point we had a large number of Italian patients. I was in frequent contact with the men, for although I knew little Italian I did speak fluent French and could usually contrive to understand most of the prisoners' conversation.

Among them, Marco had the firmest determination that he was not going to return either to the battle fronts or to his native Rome. His device for fulfilling this ambition was to marry an Englishwoman, and his sights, it was soon made clear, were trained on me.

Every time I entered the ward he would make loud protestations of undying love, always concluding with his marriage proposal. In the end I was compelled to offer a bald insult by telling him in no uncertain terms that he was the last man in the world with whom I would ever contemplate matrimony. But Marco, a small dark man of markedly thick-skinned character, was irrepressible. A week after his discharge from hospital he returned one visitors' afternoon bearing an engagement ring (he made it himself, he said) which I resolutely turned down.

My sister Phyllis and her husband were largely responsible for the most revolutionary step towards transforming my appearance. Lipstick, rouge and face powder—at first the very mention of cosmetics made the word sound like another deadly sin, and indeed I felt myself almost to have committed a sin after applying the stuff to my skin. Accustomed to accepting the face God gave me without a notion of trying to improve on Nature, I told Phyllis that I would never, *never* get used to powder and lipstick. She smiled. So did Arnold, who added with his characteristic fraternal bluntness: 'You look like death warmed up. I refuse to walk beside you in the street unless you use a bit of make-up.'

A month or two later I was forced into the conclusion reached without any heart-searching by every modern girl. 'It really does help to improve the face, doesn't it?' I told Arnold, knowing full well that his banter had been one small part of a calculated effort to aid my adjustment.

At hospital, too, the friendly mockery of the nurses did quite a lot to batter down my defensive barriers. When I first showed my reddened lips in the dining-room there was uproar. Maureen, an Irish nurse, was the first to notice them when I took my place opposite her at table.

'Look at Lightwood! She's bought herself a lipstick! Stepping out at last!' cried Maureen, her mouth half filled with toast and jam.

The others stared and took up the refrain. 'Lightwood's

stepping out. . . . Better warn the patients. . . . It might send up their temperatures. . . . Keep her away from the heart cases. . . .' *Etcetera.* But when all the nonsense had subsided I knew that at last I was accepted. Moreover, I was almost one of the 'gang' and even enjoyed a unique position as the senior member of the student nursing staff.

Before the end of my first year (how greatly and how often this word 'first' was cropping up at the age of thirty-seven) I also had my first holiday. I spent it alone in a caravan on the Derbyshire hills, a lonely site of which I had been told by one of the women in my ward.

They were four unique weeks of freedom and meditation. For the first time there was time to spare, to read, to walk for hours and many miles, to pray in an altogether new light of knowledge, and above all to make an assessment of life as I was now beginning to know it.

My caravan stood in a wooded glade at the top of a steep winding track. Nearby was a brook, a stone bridge, gnarled trees with boughs bent close to the water. Not far away was a farmhouse where I would occasionally talk with the farmer's wife; but they were busy people and apart from this occasional gossip and my once a week expedition to the village store to buy my supplies, I saw few people and talked with no one.

Silence and peace were all around me in the middle of the war. In the early evenings a fox and her cubs sometimes came to play almost at the door of the caravan.

The holiday was reminiscent of our annual periods of retreat in the convents. But it also gave me time to consider a million impressions and experiences which had become jammed into less than twelve months of this secular life.

Without a doubt, one of the most significant of these impressions was my discovery of what are called the facts of life. Aside from my physiology and other text books, I had with me on holiday a short treatise dealing with the problems of the marriage relationship. At sixteen when I

entered the convent I knew nothing whatever of the facts about marital intercourse and the birth of children. I was aware that two of a species were necessary for the procreation of the human and animal kingdoms—and that was just about the limit of my education in these matters. The how and why of conception and birth were simply a closed book to me. And although I can nowadays smile at the memory of my shocked reaction, the effect of the discovery in my thirty-eighth year was to send me into a flood of tears.

During all my years in the convents it had never been possible to discuss even the most elementary biological truths nor to glean information that would throw light on any of the vague notions that now and again pushed their way into one's consciousness. In fact, unless a girl were conversant with the basic information on the subject of sex before she entered the convent, I am convinced she could live to be ninety and remain in a condition of fogged uncertainty.

This state of ignorance in which I passed my young womanhood was also governed, of course, by the vows I had taken at nineteen. The vow of chastity was no mere renunciation of the body. It is a positive undertaking to keep the mind and heart in a state of continual purity, to banish all thought of pleasures of the flesh, and to guard chastity by every possible device. Walking with downcast eyes was intended not only to safeguard those eyes from perceiving anything that could offend, but also to protect the nun from any stimulus that might give her, so to speak, unwholesome ideas that were contrary to The Rule.

In my case, confusion and ignorance were paramount. I remember how on my nineteenth birthday, in the London convent, an ornately painted egg appeared on my breakfast plate. It bore the inscription 'With greetings from the cock that laid this egg.' The joke referred to a question I had asked a few days earlier as to whether cocks, as well as hens, were able to lay eggs. I had guessed from the hilarity that

followed that it must have been a very foolish question, but since nobody told me why or how, I just sat blushing and tried to join in the laughter against myself.

Not that the conventual view of marriage could ever be an object of criticism. Marriage was known by all of us to be a sacrament that was revered and respected. But to let the mind dwell on its physical implications, or upon any element of sensuality, was not permissible, though it should be noted that concentration on this aspect of the subject was hardly likely to occur with the average nun, to whom purity of thought rapidly becomes second nature.

Anyway, I returned to earth refreshed after my holiday, and convinced that nursing was my vocation and future career—an idea that was given a heartening fillip by the news on the notice board that I had passed my preliminary exams.

Chapter Eight

Birth of a Notion

SUDDENLY it was the end of the war, at least of the war in Europe; with some surprise I realized that this marked the passage of almost three years of learning to live and work in the everyday world. Time and events moved so fast, I had only the haziest awareness of the progress I was making.

Fantastic how the trivialities are remembered. Nowadays the only vivid incident from the day of victory in Europe is that in the evening, at a victory celebration party, I smoked my first cigarette. First and last. The secret of the smoker's enjoyment eluded me completely. I found it impossible either to puff or blow without choking, and told the nurse who talked me into it: 'I think I shall have to try being sociable without the aid of tobacco.'

By this time I had moved from the Sheffield hospital. One among many new friends made during my training there was a certain young ward sister who frequently talked of her plans for opening a private nursing home when the war was over. Her proposal was that once I was fully qualified I should join her at the nursing home, and since this seemed a good method of winning quite a varied experience and a post of responsibility I agreed to do so. First, however, I went as a staff nurse to a small hospital in the West Riding

of Yorkshire where this same young Sheffield companion was then working.

This move was not without its anxieties. Even before my three years of training at Sheffield were finished, a mild heart attack and the onset of bouts of migraine had made me wonder if I were, after all, fit enough for the job of nursing (and oh, how maddenning were these accidents and illnesses that seemed to have dogged me over so many years, and through so many important phases of activity). So it was not long before I had certain reservations about my job in West Riding. My hopes of a less strenuous working life in a small hospital was utterly wide of the mark. I was soon in a decidedly run-down condition.

There was no resident doctor at the hospital, which was an old fever institution where we had to determine for ourselves, more or less, the nature and seriousness of the cases until such time as the doctor could attend. Nevertheless, as a staff nurse in charge of an entire block I learned a great deal. Not only, I might add, about medical and nursing problems, but also—and with just the slightest feeling of bitter irony—about the vagaries and occasional duplicity of human beings.

The irony arose as a direct result of my one and only excursion into what may be called the emotions of 'solidarity', in the trade union sense of that term.

When the war ended my ward sister colleague left the Yorkshire hospital staff and set off on the search for her long dreamed of nursing home. I stayed behind, awaiting the message to join her. At about the same time, the hospital had a change of matron, and it was not long before there was a good deal of tension throughout the institution.

From the start I was on good terms with matron and had no particular personal complaints, but many of the nurses and especially our probationers were full of grumbling discontent.

Some said, perhaps with justification, that matron was

running the staff affairs as if the war emergency was still with us, that day and night duties were being switched around without proper consultation with the nurses concerned, that adequate off duty periods were not being granted, and so on. Grievances real or imagined flew thick and fast.

One day when the tide of discontent was high I asked the nurses if they approved the idea of my writing a formal letter to the hospital committee, requesting a meeting to be held in matron's presence at which grievances could be honestly and fully aired. Cries of delighted assent greeted the suggestion. The probationers, it was pointed out, were inevitably a little afraid to speak up for themselves as individuals, but with a solid front and myself as their spokeswoman the rest of the nursing staff would soon find their voices.

Next day I wrote and delivered, through matron, a polite letter which asked for our meeting. Soon afterwards the committee chairman sent his reply, fixing a date. I told the nurses the good news and the stage was set for the great protest.

When the day of the conference arrived, having made a neat note of points I was to raise as spokeswoman for the students, I certainly felt a trifle nervous about our encounter with the bigwigs, but I steeled myself for the occasion, knowing that as senior member of the staff the least I could do was to play my part in seeing that justice was served.

The meeting began. The chairman was patiently benevolent. Matron sat silent at one side. Soon I was on my feet outlining the issues. Eventually, and thankfully, I sat down.

From that meeting I emerged a shaken woman. Not a solitary other voice was raised in support. When the chairman invited nurses to add their own contribution, those who were able to open their mouths declared they had nothing to complain of, and one girl went so far as to assert that the staff had no idea why Lightwood had called the meeting.

I knew, of course, that fear lay behind their pathetic display, but I was more than a little perturbed all the same.

For the most part the weeks went by in a breathless rush of hard toil. I was not making life any easier for myself by taking, on top of all my duties, a part-time course in chiropody; but I was still uncertain of the future and thought there would be no harm in having a second string to my bow, especially one that might some day provide me with a less strenuous career. I thought too that chiropody would be quieter. I was still oppressed at being constantly surrounded by fairly large groups of people, and above all by the eternal chatter of conversation.

Then for a few months to the impressive and lovely city of Lincoln, helping my old colleague who had at last succeeded in establishing her nursing home. We were a busy pair, and the interlude was for me a happy one during which I spent most of my few leisure hours walking in the ancient city, or in and around the great cathedral which dominates the entire region.

Somewhere I read or heard that Ruskin had written an opinion that was easy enough to share. He was prepared, he said, to maintain 'against all comers, that the cathedral of Lincoln is out and out the most precious piece of architecture in the British Isles, and, roughly speaking, worth any two other cathedrals we have got'.

Inside the cathedral I was always fascinated by the beauty of the celebrated rose windows, one at each end of the great transept. These are called 'Bishop's Eye' and 'Dean's Eye'.

The central tower, with its five-ton bell, the glorious Great Tom, seemed to me to have achieved a level of perfection and grace to be found only in the world's most inspired major works of architecture and music.

And yet, none of these provoked in me the same degree of interest—interest that was half amused, half hypnotized—

as a small grinning figure which projected its queer presence from one of the piers in the cathedral's Angel Choir.

This was the Lincoln Imp, the small and famous grotesque grimacing from its perch on a corbel of the choir which is itself one of the great glories of Gothic architecture.

There are thirty sculptured angels built into the arches of the Angel Choir, but there is only one Lincoln Imp, and with the sight of him I was always intrigued, just as I felt always ennobled by the sight of the angels.

Naturally there was a legend surrounding the imp. Long ago, it was said, a stormy wind carried an imp from hell to the doors of the Lincoln cathedral. The wind burst open the minster's south entrance and in flew the imp, who then proceeded to wreak havoc and sacrilege in various parts of the church. Eventually he came to the Angel Choir, where he settled on a pillar to survey the scene before continuing his antics.

Seeing the company of angels above him he began hurling insults and unholy abuse. But the angels turned their eyes upon him, and by the merest look from the smallest angel among them, he was changed to stone in that perch on the pillar where he can be seen by all men and women to this day. He sits strangely, with hands clasped over his right leg which is crossed over the left.

The legend is probably a nineteenth century concoction. One version of its birth concerns an American visitor who was attempting to trace his ancestors who sailed from England with the Pilgrim Fathers. At Lincoln the American asked a local craftsman to make for him a brass or plaster image of one of the medieval grotesques to be seen among the many Early English decorations in the minster. The nineteenth century tradesman chose at random this small figure of the devil holding its leg. But having made his model for the American, the tradesman then made several more. There was soon a ready sale for his 'Lincoln Imp', and the selling of the legend was no doubt a useful supporting activity.

In the Angel Choir the little imp or devil is a foot-high carving, difficult to locate unless you know where to seek it. A student of the minster told me the imp was typical of the countless bits of humanistic carving which the medieval craftsmen used to insert in order to relieve the formality and tedium of their sculptured geometric designs. They did this in many ways—sometimes by carving a small dog curled up in the centre of a stylized flower; in another place, there is a nest of fledglings in the centre of a carved flower, while next to it is the parent bird carrying a worm; somewhere else, a formal flower tendril is made to end in a tiny sculpture of a human head, the crowned head of King Edward I.

The imp, serving in a similar way some medieval craftsman's purpose, was probably the facetious portrait of an unpopular foreman of his day.

Imp and angel. The appeal of the odd figure in the cathedral had a good deal to do, I suppose, with my own restless and at times rebellious turns of feelings. Self-willed imp. Blend of angel and the old Adam in all of us. In the case of the self-willed Lightwood imp, its drives and influences were doubtless the key to those years that ended in my failure as a nun, renunciation of my vows and the compulsive urge to direct my own brand of missionary labours in my own stubborn fashion.

After Lincoln, again to London. Having completed my chiropody course (a correspondence course with a somewhat amateurish diploma at the end of it) I returned for a time to my sister's flat in Streatham. From there I found a job, at a weekly salary of £4 10s., as an assistant with a busy chiropody clinic at Fulham. The work was always interesting, and there were some queer sights to be seen among patients who looked otherwise normal balanced human beings. Of these, the most bizarre was a middle-aged housewife who hobbled into the surgery one evening shortly before closing time at seven. I walked into the

cubicle to be greeted by the woman with profuse apologies for the state of her feet; she had not even begun to remove her shoes and stockings.

The reason was plain enough as soon as I saw the feet. She had not cut her toe-nails, she said, for ten years. They were a set of horrific talons that curled beneath her toes and were now pushing their way into the pad of flesh on the soles, making every step a torture. By the time I had finished with them she was virtually dancing with joy around the cubicle, voicing her gratitude at my successful essay in this outlandish piece of surgery.

To the outside world *I* was the curio, the woman from the cloister, the once black-habited nun and missionary about whose secret life 'ordinary' people are for ever full of wonder. As my clinic patient departed I could not help reflecting that there were more freakish sights to be found among 'ordinary' people than any I had ever encountered inside the cloister.

By the winter of 1945 I was again in a jumpy, discontented state, hating the cold, longing for the air and scenes of the Far East and perversely missing the hospital life with all its chatter that was so recently irksome. In any case my correspondence course diploma in chiropody was scorned by clinics in the London area, and it was insisted that if I wanted to continue then I must take a medical auxiliary examination requiring further study. As a qualified nurse it was permissible for me to do this in a shortened course which I could combine with a part-time job.

I moved to South Kensington, started work in a London suburban hospital where they put me in charge of a T.B. ward, set about my chiropody course in the evenings, and rented my first room. Except during the initial stay with my sisters Edna and Phyllis it was the first time for nearly thirty years that I had lived away from the sheltering arms of some type of religious or nursing institution.

Gloom then descended like a London smog. I returned

to my room at about eight each evening and found myself aching for companionship. The migraine attacks grew worse. Often, after a week of hard work, I spent whole Sundays in my bed, eating little or nothing and even staying away from Mass. Sometimes I dragged myself out of the house but just as often turned back before reaching the church door, so sickening was the pain of the migraine.

Somehow I got through my chiropody examinations, then went back to work at the Fulham clinic. At this time the shortage of nurses in hospitals all over Britain was acute, and I felt impelled to make some small effort to help in view of the fact that I was after all a trained nurse. So I offered my services for two hours a day to a local hospital, attending from six to eight each morning which was the most hectic time in the wards. It meant rising at 5 a.m., and on top of the clinic work, together with house-cleaning, washing and personal chores, it was all rather exhausting. At night the weariness served only to heighten the loneliness.

Sometimes, passing the doorways of pubs, I stopped and listened to the laughter and music that drifted from the bars. How I wished that someone, some good close friend, were there to take *me* into the pub for an hour of relaxed recreation. I was envious of cheerful Londoners wherever I met them.

Once, on a visit to Edna at Streatham, I tried unburdening myself and told her I was utterly miserable; but if, in this recitation, sympathy was my motive, I got none. Indeed my sister lectured me quite sternly. 'You must stop this eternal hankering after being somewhere where you are not, doing what you cannot, living how you cannot live,' she said. For a while I was hurt by the onslaught, until I returned thoughtfully to my room that night and realized that Edna was enormously concerned for my well-being.

For no particular reason, or so it seemed at the time, I then sat up till the small hours writing a letter to my old Superior in the Bangkok convent. I told her in detail

the story of all that had befallen me since my departure from Thailand. It was a long letter, ending with what I suppose was a cry from the heart, expressing my deep attachment to Bangkok, Xieng Mai and all that they had meant.

A week later I started looking for the reply. I would run to the door whenever the postman called, though having no idea why I ran. A contact with my old life was all I craved.

Weeks passed and no letter came. I drifted on, my spirits now up, now down—but mostly down.

Then, when I'd almost forgotten my letter to Reverend Mother, I reached home one evening to find on the mat an envelope with a Thai stamp.

As I raced upstairs with it, tears rolled down my cheeks. By the time I opened the letter I was howling with nostalgic self-pity. But by the time I had finished reading it the tears were changed to tears of excited release from tension.

The letter spoke of many things, but the only one my dimmed eyes were able to see was a strange, marvellous question: *Would I be interested in returning to Thailand to establish the country's first Catholic maternity hospital?*

Interested!

My reply—saying little more than yes, yes, yes—was in the pillarbox of the Kensington street long before midnight. I went without supper, climbed into bed, and for the first night in many a long year I dreamed sweetly.

Over the next few months life was pleasurably, almost unbearably hectic, like the hours of preparation for one of those long-planned events which seem, in the anticipation, to be a vital part of one's design for personal happiness.

The man who was planning this first Catholic maternity hospital was a young Thai doctor called Thui. We exchanged frequent letters and I was quickly impressed by his ambitious picture of the future that lay ahead. The immedi-

ate prospect was not altogether clearly in view, for the hospital was still a dream. Nor was he quite certain, he said, about how and when and with what resources it would be established. At this point he was in charge of a Chinese hospital at Bangkok, and his proposal was that I should join him there as matron, to make sure that we could work well together before venturing into the great maternity project that he was obviously determined to bring to life. The offer seemed fair enough.

Doctor Thui told me he was anxious to set up the new hospital in close collaboration with two of his Thai medical friends. One was a surgeon, Phong, the other a young doctor specializing in midwifery, a Doctor Siri. The three men had all been together in Ireland, where they studied. All three were intent on the goal of a modern Catholic maternity hospital in Thailand, where the women of poorer families often underwent tragic suffering in childbirth through lack of care and decent facilities.

Agreeing with Thui that it was a good plan for us to get to know each other, I told him I would prepare for the journey as soon as I had taken one more vital step—my own training in the arts of midwifery, for I had so far done no maternity work in England.

Without delay I began my midwifery course. Six months later, my air passage booked and paid for by Thui's hospital, I left London in thick fog, bound for Poole where a BOAC flying boat would carry me to my beloved Thai city of canals.

I said good-bye to my sisters, and cleared out my Kensington room. I took one last look at foggy London. I was certain that all the years gone by were no more than a preparation to begin the real work of God on which I was now setting forth.

The driver of the coach from London to Poole could see little enough in the pea-souper enveloping the roads. For safety he followed a milk float through the streets of

south-west London—and did it so assiduously that before long we landed in the back yard of the milkman's dairy. There was general laughter over this pantomime, easing the tension and putting us all in a good mood for the long flight.

In four hours we reached the south coast at Poole.

Fours day were all that separated us from the Chao Phya River leading me back to Bangkok.

Chapter Nine

The Flags are Out

As the flying boat touched down on the river near Bangkok, a short, chunky Chinese businessman leaned across the gangway, tapped my arm, then touched his cheeks with his fingers and said, 'I can see the flags are out.'

I knew quite enough of Chinese innuendo to realize he referred to me. My face was flushed red with excitement.

We were landing on the river at a place called Klong Toi. It was November again, and how unlike that other November nearly twenty years back when a Reverend Mother had welcomed me as a missionary. Now I was returning as . . . what? In a sense I felt myself to be a missionary still.

Missionary in nylons, with a perm in her hair—perhaps that was the only real difference.

Peering from the cabin I was surprised to see a gang of girls in nurses' uniforms standing on the quayside watching another aircraft unload its passengers into launches. For a nation as desperately hard-up for nursing labour as this one was, they should have something better to do, I reflected. Ten minutes later I was ashamed and astonished to discover that the nursing contingent was a 'Welcome to Thailand' committee for me their new matron. The flags were out indeed. Leading the girls was a trio of tall men, exceptionally

tall anyway for Thais and Chinese. One was my erstwhile correspondent and new collaborator Doctor Thui, another was the Chinese owner of the hospital where I was to begin, the third a hospital committee official.

Doctor Thui was a most agreeable looking man of about thirty, part Thai, part Chinese. While studying in Ireland he had become a Catholic convert, hence his contact with my former Superior and his resulting interest in my return to Thailand.

My room at the Chinese hospital, he explained, would not be ready for a day or two. Meantime I was to stay with his sister and her family in a house not far away. During the drive, Thui said one thing that answered any curiosity about his fanatical determination to launch the Thai maternity unit.

'I suppose what sent me into medicine,' he said, answering my question, 'was the fact that my own mother died through sheer lack of medical attention.'

But when, that same evening, I saw his hospital, I began to marvel that thousands more were not dying before their time. Better to have a poor hospital, I supposed, than no hospital at all, but it was at once obvious that conditions were far worse than any I had imagined.

It was after dark when we arrived. Doctor Thui had to see a woman patient who was on the danger list. Then he gave me a conducted tour of the place, which had once been a private house, and later a kind of lodging house holding seventy Chinese families. Small shops and stalls lined the narrow street just outside the hospital, and it was difficult to squeeze a small car through to the entrance.

We went first to what they fondly regarded as an out-patients' department: a small dirty room containing a couple of benches, next door to a battery of lavatories which reeked their evidence that the drainage was almost non-existent. This was only a start, however.

A pair of tiny consulting rooms—they were really no

more than cubicles and just as dirty as the out-patients'—led directly into the wards. From this moment I finished the tour in silence.

On the beds in the first two wards there were straw mattresses. Each mattress had a kind of matting cover, but the covers were filthy and most of them also bloodstained. There were ticking pillows without pillow-cases. There were no sheets on the beds.

In both rooms babies slept with their mothers, sick or well. After the confinement, I learned, the mother was usually discharged, or, what was more common, left of her own accord, in three or four days.

The floors were unswept and indescribably littered with soiled rags and dressings.

Then came a worse shock. 'Those are two of our better wards—only for paying patients,' said Doctor Thui calmly. 'The non-paying patients are through this door. . . .'

Shaking myself to make sure it was real, I followed him into the public wards. Once inside I did not know whether to weep or burst out with my anger.

In these wards there were no mattresses, only a frayed lump of matting to cover each wooden frame bed. Bloodstains were everywhere. No pillows, and those women who were propped up in bed had a stained folded palliasse supporting their backs.

Old army mosquito nets, grey and tattered, were strung around the patients, and I could see the bed bugs chasing each other up or down the netting, and racing around the breeding areas in the corners of the nets.

No sheets anywhere. Spittoons beside each patient, but no one ever hit the target. Spittle, puddles of water, fruit skins, bits of paper, bloody dressings, all over the floors. Babies bleating and mothers coughing sadly.

This so-called 'maternity' hospital had no nappies, and no sanitary pads. Each woman used rice paper to clean her child. The paper was then tossed on the floor with

the rest of the garbage. Smells of sweat, blood, babies, unwashed bodies. Floors thick with muck so that you had to pick your way, treading carefully to avoid a slippery fall.

It was all so terrible that normal feelings of nausea were, so to speak, by-passed. It was my heart, not my stomach, that felt sickened.

After the tour, Doctor Thui took me home. As we drove off he said: 'Well, what d'you think of the place?'

I told him it almost left me speechless. 'I have never in my life seen anything so foul. I can hardly believe it.'

Thui was taken aback. 'The place is not in good condition, I agree,' he said. 'But I'm surprised you think it quite so awful. At least,' he added ruefully, 'you speak your mind.'

For a while I was completely at a loss to understand how, after all his training and observation in European medical schools, he could still tolerate the scale of the crimes against cleanliness all around him; and I told myself that he was doubtless obliged to shut his mind to realities in order to pursue his ultimate aims. This reasoning on my part was rather naïve, as I soon discovered. The fact was that neither Thui nor any doctor was in a position to cure those crimes against hygiene with the pitiful resources we possessed. Time and patience, determination, prolonged domestic labouring, and scores of scrubbing brushes, all of which were beyond the doctor's control, were the chief needs.

It was intended that I should enjoy a few days' rest before taking up my duties, but I was so oppressed by the first visit that I wanted to get to work without delay, and told him I would prefer to postpone my brief holiday. Thui agreed that I could start the next morning.

My staff consisted of twelve qualified nurses, all Chinese, supported by about fifty probationers. In addition there were several women cleaners and male cooks. I was the only European in the hospital, in fact the only Westerner working in any Chinese or Thai hospital, I think, except

for the nuns and doctors of the mission hospitals where conditions were normally first-rate.

Most of the Chinese in Thailand spoke Thai, so although I had lost my old fluency I was still able to make myself understood and soon overcame the chief language difficulties. My real troubles were due partly to the internal politics and jealousies of the place, partly to the fact that I went into action with more urgency than diplomacy.

My notions about the status and responsibilities of a matron were derived, of course, from my training hospital in England. But the steward, or manager, at Bangkok—a short bald Chinese called Ah Kim—had a very different concept of my role. He looked on me as a head nurse, without real authority over other nurses or over anything else for that matter. Ah Kim had quick nervous movements, reminding me of the small squirrel known as a tree rat, and from the start he made clear his reluctance to co-operate.

My first line of attack was quite incomprehensible to both staff and patients. 'The floors,' I announced, 'must be swept and scrubbed each morning, and swept again in the afternoon. What is more, they must be kept swept and scrubbed. Litter must be placed in receptacles, not strewn under the beds or dropped around the wards.' I obtained some baskets for rubbish, but no one paid much attention to them until I'd delivered my little lecture a dozen times.

The hospital had some seventy beds, although over the next four months there were often as many as a hundred maternity cases in the wards; and since no woman ever stayed more than four days after the delivery of her baby, our turnover was rapid. We delivered an average of more than four hundred babies each month, and twice there were more than five hundred births.

During the first week I stood in for one of the nurses who was given time off, and discovered that a good many students did little or no work at all. How did they get away with it, I wondered. And soon it became plain that

the hours of duty depended largely on how well-disposed the manager Ah Kim felt towards each girl.

My next attack was on bedding. With some difficulty I persuaded the hospital committee to buy cotton sheeting, and for several weeks I busied myself with the manufacture of bedclothes.

Then I arranged a nursery for the babies. It was essential to exercise some control over the feeding of the newly-born infants. I was appalled at the habit of the Chinese mothers to feed their offspring on bananas and hard dried fish, and already we had had several deaths that way. I thought that by separating the babies it would be easier to take reasonable precautions against the mothers' tendency to asphyxiate the poor little creatures. One night I was called urgently to administer to a baby that had gone blue in the face. Never before or since have I dealt with an infant suffering from blueness caused by having half a banana stuck down its throat.

Sometimes I wondered whether I might have avoided more of the troubles that came our way if I had had more skill and experience, in the sense that nursing administration is understood by hospitals in Britain. But perhaps even the most accomplished hospital matron might have become desperate at the conditions that were accepted as normal—and I was far from accomplished. It was difficult to know how to start improving things; on the other hand it was impossible to accept the fantastic standards that prevailed.

I made myself decidedly unpopular on the day I announced a new regulation—that the student nurses should be responsible for emptying bed pans, instead of leaving them cluttered around the floors for the sweepers to deal with. Useless to explain that from bed pans a nurse could even learn something about the condition of her patients. The action provoked great hostility.

The nursing staff were broadly in two camps: those who believed in work, those who did not. To make matters worse

I soon discovered I had no real support on the hospital committee.

Most of its members resented having a Westerner in charge, although it was not long before they developed a complacent new pride in our standards of cleanliness. Visitors were brought in and the first item emphasized by Ah Kim was an ironic tribute to my efforts.

'Have you ever seen such fine clean floors,' he would say with a brazen preening gesture as if the achievement were his own.

In general they had no idea of what was essential in the way of sterile conditions, and for a long time it was impossible for me even to worry about the finer points of the dangers of sepsis. With a policy of first things first I tried to get rid of the filth, to organize the nursing and domestic work, in short to rid the place of some of its more horrifying evils.

New Year's Day, 1948, was perhaps the most memorable time of crisis I shall ever know. Without consulting me Ah Kim had given every qualified nurse and midwife a whole day's holiday. Many of our student nurses were also off duty, and I had only a handful of probationers to help me cope with our overfull complement of about a hundred patients.

The labour wards were full. The nursery overflowed into the ante-natal room. Several of our women were delivering their babies long before breakfast.

By lunchtime we had twenty-eight mothers in the last stages of labour and ready to deliver at any moment. Sixteen babies were born within a few minutes of each other. I and my few probationers were rushing like scalded cats from one patient to another. Forceps here, bowls of hot water there, scissors and dressings and chaos everywhere.

When the afternoon was drawing to a close I decided there was nothing better to hope for than the survival of our fittest inmates. I had one woman literally on the floor

in labour at my feet, while I was agonizingly striving to get some life into another's baby who had studdenly stopped breathing.

Next morning I could hardly believe the news that not a single one of our mothers and new-born infants had perished.

Against the background of my totally inadequate technical skill and training, only the grace of God could have produced such a miraculous result.

Because we lost sight of these mothers so soon after the births it was impossible to keep check on all the post-natal dangers, especially puerperal fever. We knew only that too many babies died, ill-fed and miserably, in poor homes. I remember that during these first four months I baptized at least fifty who later died, according to my information from patients and nurses. Yet under such conditions perhaps fifty neo-natal fatalities out of nearly two thousand births was not so bad.

As for modern ante-natal care, it was unknown with the majority of our women who came from poor families. We had trouble enough persuading mothers to register with us for a bed at the time of confinement; all propaganda designed to make them continue attending before and after the birth was just a hard uphill fight. Once the baby was born and, to their minds, doing fairly well, why continue with long treks to a hospital?

We also had hundreds of difficult births, and although it was truly important to follow up the cases of these 'forceps babies' and their mothers, I doubt if we were able to keep contact with more than five or ten per cent.

In the wards, I noticed that the older women were the most bigoted and ignorant about absurd feeding methods. One day I tried talking with a mother of eight, injecting a little hygiene and dietetics into the conversation, or so I thought.

She said: 'I have given seven babies bananas and dried fish—and they are all good children.'

Soon after I had built a fairly stable routine for the nursery, insisting that the babies should remain there for most of the day and all the night (mothers had them for mealtimes only) there was a minor crisis that took some prolonged argument to settle. The mothers began accusing me of killing their infants by means of starvation. Every time a baby in the nursery was heard to yell, every mother within earshot protested it was hers, and demanded to have the child beside her in bed thereafter.

All confinements and birth troubles were accepted as a matter of course, and I could never discover if the mother were truly saddened when a child died. There was always some weeping if the dead baby happened to be a boy; but for girls there seemed to be no sense of loss whatever.

The hospital had no operating theatre, so whenever a confinement was beyond our capacities, we had to send the woman to a bigger hospital on the other side of the city. Normal forceps deliveries, with anaesthetics which I quickly had to learn to administer myself, were all in our day's work. We certainly had some bad cases, and some astonishing deliveries, for which I regularly thanked God and Doctor Thui.

My apprenticeship in the techniques of emergency midwifery seemed to be completed on the day I went shopping and found a prostrate pregnant woman in a doorway, surrounded by a crowd of chattering people. Passing down the street I had come abreast of the crowd and was about to ignore them when a voice said: 'She does not move. She has been lying here all the morning.'

After pushing my way to the front I saw the woman, a pathetic, aged and ageless Chinese, dressed in the usual full pants and coat blouse, her head resting on a stone step and the rest of her twisted body poking into the street. Her mother sat on the step, groaning while she held the woman's head and rocked helplessly back and forth.

Squatting beside them I began examining the woman and

straight away found that she was not only in labour but on the point of delivering her child. I sent a girl among the crowd to fetch hot water and towels, and a young man to call the ambulance. No one, not even the mother, had made the smallest effort to get the woman into hospital.

The baby came five minutes before the ambulance arrived. I wrapped it in a towel and held it close until we reached hospital, where Doctor Thui took over both mother and child. I cannot recall what happened afterwards but I believe the child did not survive.

In their own homes it was common practice for the Chinese woman to squat on the floor to deliver her child. Even when they came into the hospital, having booked a bed and seemingly to have understood the purpose of it all, several women climbed out of bed when the time came, tottered out of the ward to a lavatory at the far end of a long corridor and delivered themselves without fuss. If we were hectically busy elsewhere there was no chance of knowing the patient's plight until one of us heard a cry, either the child's or the mother's. Such were the problems in a country which was, one had to remind oneself, a fairly advanced nation compared with the truly backward territories of the world.

Altogether I spent a little over four months in this atmosphere of medical squalor. Two months elapsed before I could move my few belongings into the hospital, where I was eventually given a room which was a portion of the veranda divided into bedroom and sitting-room. Long before then I made great friends with Thui, with his sisters (known as Pee Lek and Pee Yai, which means 'little sister' and 'big sister') and with their family and companions—especially the two medical men with whom I was soon to be more closely associated. The latter were Siri, the thin boyish Thai doctor who had five handsome children and an equally lovely wife called Yindi, and the surgeon Mr. Phong,

a wiry and extremely athletic little man without an ounce of superfluous fat. Thui himself was still, so far, a bachelor.

I was indebted to Pee Lek and Doctor Thui for much more than their hospitality, which was, anyway, of a high order. They and their friends also played an enormous part, full of kindness and tolerance, in my slow faltering adjustment. I think most of my growing up took place in Bangkok during the first few years after the release from my vows, and there was no doubt that Thui and his sisters, along with Phong, Siri, Yindi and several others, were my guides and guardian angels in the matter of learning to live in a society that was not administered by autocratic religious or institutional rule.

Certainly the religious way of life was governed by various forms of what is called good breeding; but there are countless small pieces of civilized behaviour and manners that are dispensed with inside the cloister. The nun is rarely if ever concerned with the niceties of social intercourse; she has, as it were, no party manners; and to this day, when introducing men and women who have not previously met, I have difficulty in remembering such oddments as whether the lady's name should be presented to the man or vice versa. These together with many other conventions were things I had to learn, like a child; and many I learned from my good Thai friends.

Not by any means the least interesting of these lessons lay in the minor social graces involving Thai and Chinese customs. Entering a Thai house one would, of course, remove the shoes, and sit with feet carefully tucked away. In these years, too, I also learned for the first time in my life to enjoy the luxury of food superbly cooked. Pee Lek was a wonderful housewife who could cook not only Thai and Chinese dishes but also English foods.

The Thais have in general a better standard of living than Indians and at most main meals there would be soup, vegetables, meat dishes, often fish and eggs as well and

always, of course, rice. One dish which invariably appeared on the table was *Genk Phed*, a variety of red chilli which is so hot that tears are brought to the eyes of almost every Westerner who touches it. Recalling the frugality of the Bangkok convent I felt something of a gormandizer with so many delicacies spread at Pee Lek's table.

Of all these Thai delicacies, the strangest was one among the vast variety of fruits that abound throughout the country. This was the durian, a long hard-skinned affair with spikes on it, dangerous enough to make it advisable for the orchard picker to wear a helmet against the threat of concussion if one should fall on his head. The appalling feature of the durian, which I believe has a high sulphur content, is its smell ('like a dung heap in a mortuary' as one of our group graphically expressed it), so pungent that I was utterly sickened when I first encountered it in the Bangkok convent some twenty years earlier.

Thui's family at last prevailed on me to fight down my revulsion and at least taste a morsel of the fruit. I picked up a small piece, the whole family meanwhile watching for my reaction. Wrinkling my nose and still protesting in horror at the stink, I put the stuff in my mouth and began chewing.

A moment later the group were clapping their hands in delight as a broad smile of beatific pleasure appeared on my face. The durian, I found, was a fruit for the gods, an elixir, with a taste of such ineffable quality that I could hardly believe it to be true. I confessed there and then: 'To think I have taken twenty years to discover the durian. I could kick myself.'

One drawback about the return to Thailand was quickly apparent. The Bangkok mosquitoes were at me with unprecedented venom. I had known years earlier what it was like for my flesh to be a feasting ground for these pests, and despite the nun's long habit there was always special concentration on the legs; mine were in those days a frightful sight until

eventually I became acclimatized, as most people do, and went untroubled.

This time, however, I had to undergo the initiation, the ordeal of eternal biting, as if I were a newcomer, and with short skirts and bared forearms it was doubly debilitating. At night I would try to sleep with a large pillowcase wrapped securely around my legs, but this made little difference; the Thai mosquitoes went through everything.

Despite gradual improvements in conditions, there remained a disturbing undercurrent of tension and animosity in the hospital organization. Half the time I was unaware of the precise nature of the difficulties, but they came to a head in the spring of 1948 when a controversy arose over the employment of my best nurse. She was a highly efficient Thai girl, and the only trained Thai nurse among the otherwise Chinese nursing staff. This was in fact the key to the trouble. The Chinese resented her presence no less than mine, and before long we were facing a crisis of staff relationships that would clearly end in disaster if no action were taken. I was pretty certain that the action would mean the eventual dismissal of the Thai girl, but I resisted this step as long as possible.

One day I was asked to attend a committee meeting, its object to devise some formula to cope with the awkward situation. Like all Chinese conferences this one dragged on interminably, beating about the bush a great deal before it appeared that I was to be the instrument for saving face all round. What they really wanted was the Thai girl's instant dismissal, ordered by me. I did some quick thinking, then announced my willingness to co-operate under certain conditions. Knowing full well that the girl was doomed no matter what I decided, I told the chairman that although I refused to dismiss her, I would ask her to begin looking for a post in another hospital and to let me know as soon as she had found one—adding, however, that if this step were to be taken, I must also insist on the dismissal of four

Chinese girls who consistently refused to work and as nurses were more trouble than they were worth. On top of all this I wanted real authority as matron, demanding that there should be no further interference in the performance of that role. I was quite surprised when the chairman called for a general opinion and everyone agreed that my proposals were thoroughly acceptable. The meeting then closed.

Next morning I discovered to my horror that the Thai nurse had been given notice to quit by the hospital manager; her room had been locked; she was now being refused entrance to the premises. Straight away I went to my small office to collect the notices which I had already written in English, and then summoned the four Chinese nurses to whom an interpreter issued the news of their dismissal. One of the girls reacted with some violence, and spat upon me; another issued dire warnings that if I persisted in my attitude I could depend upon it my life would soon come to an end. Ignoring all this, I went to the committee chairman with an ultimatum. Handing him my own notice I announced that I could not remain in the hospital unless the Thai girl was reinstated. I think this was what they had been waiting for, and a few days later I found myself without a job.

I was also homeless, but Thui and Pee Yai soon came to the rescue. In the compound where Pee Yai and her family lived was a small house which they offered me. The house was just a two-roomed structure, one up, one down, and it suited me perfectly. I had a few pounds of savings which I changed into Thai money so I was not likely to starve, not at least for a few months.

The main trouble was that we were no nearer our dream of establishing a Thai maternity hospital, and to make matters worse Doctor Thui was about to depart for Europe in order to pursue a further course of study.

I was all in favour of starting our maternity project in one small room until we were sufficiently affluent to operate on a larger scale; but that idea did not suit Thui who

wanted to go into the business in a big way right at the beginning. Anyway, he sailed for England and we agreed that when he returned in a few months we could think again about the project.

At least for a while it looked as if I would have to be content to remain in the doldrums, so there seemed no reason why I should not accept a holiday invitation I received from one of Thui's cousins, a pleasant young woman called Khun Lek. The idea was that we should travel to Annam, where she lived. I was intrigued when Khun Lek told me that one of her closest friends, a princess who was the King's aunt, would be coming with us. The princess's name I never did get to know, for royalty were not addressed by name, so throughout the holiday I called her simply Than Ying, which means princess.

We went first by boat to Annam, and as the captain was an old friend of Khun Lek's he loaned us his cabin. It was a tight squeeze, for we had a couple of camp beds as well as all our luggage—and only those who have first-hand experience of the quantities of luggage carried by Thais on a country journey can appreciate the problem. Khun Lek was also taking large numbers of gifts for her father and the rest of the family.

Arriving at last in her village, we were taken to stay in the headman's house, which was quite a small palace in its fashion, all its rooms having comfortable cane beds and marble floors. We rested there for two days until Khun Lek had visited all her relations in the area. It was my first experience of living completely in the style of the Thais: sitting on floors to eat, walking around the house with bare feet, bathing with the aid of a small bucket, tossing the water over one's body in a pleasant but not particularly effective form of shower.

We also made numerous trips into the hills and surrounding countryside, the most adventurous of these being an excursion to the scene of a celebrated waterfall.

Our route went through paddy fields which were swamped but barren of rice. They were also crammed with large black leeches which fastened themselves on to the bullocks drawing the cart in which Than Ying, Khun Lek and I were travelling.

Before the journey was half over, however, we were the victims of a cloudburst producing a downpour rare even by Thai standards. By late afternoon, soaked to the skin and with all our sleeping equipment also drenched, we reached a small house where we were to stay the night—an almost derelict building belonging to yet one more of Khun Lek's countless friends in the region.

We were determined not to miss the waterfall, which was a mile or so farther on, but there was a problem of wet clothes. Than Ying solved it with what we gaily agreed was a sensible proposal. 'The evening is warm,' said the princess, 'the trees and the ground are dripping wet, so let us put on our swimming suits.'

Ten minutes later the three of us set off, barefoot, dressed only in bathing costumes. What a trio, I thought—a beautiful Thai girl, a Thai princess, and an Englishwoman who was once a missionary. To my mind the trek was going to be an hour of enormous fun. I felt as young and sprightly as a girl guide.

It was not long before it turned into a nightmarish walk. The road led through a swampy rubber plantation, and when we had gone not quite half the distance the leeches began attacking. They were brown in colour and smaller than the big black brutes in the rice fields, but they could suck powerfully enough for all that. We were plucking them from our own and each other's skin over the next hour and a half.

When we reached the waterfall I could not suppress my disappointment. It was a pleasant scene, but nothing to write home about.

A wiser but still far from sad trio made its way home,

through the gauntlet of leeches again. Reaching the derelict house we realized that our clothes and belongings were still sodden. There was nothing for it but to sleep, if we could, in our bathing costumes. In a strange way the whole experience was glorious and exciting. It was, I suppose, a sample of freedom of a kind I had never before tasted.

A new shock awaited me when we returned to Bangkok. My little house in Pee Yai's compound had been entered by thieves. They had stolen some of my clothes, and one or two trinkets, but either they missed the few bits of silver and money I possessed or were disturbed at some point during the burglary. I hid the money under my low-built bed, but was sick with fear that the thieves might return, and did not sleep a wink.

Next night I took two sleeping tablets. I might as well have advertised the fact throughout the district, for they came again in the small hours and cleaned me out of almost everything I possessed, including my typewriter and spectacles. Even the blanket on my bed and the torch beneath my pillow were taken. There was just one consolation, which was some indication of the raiders' stupidity. The money under the bed was still overlooked.

In the morning I pinned a placard to the door, scrawling the inscription: 'Cleaned out: nothing left for thieves.'

Chapter Ten

Training My Thai Nurses

THE Annam holiday ended, I was still without a job, and very soon almost without money. The friends I had, all of comparatively new standing, could scarcely be expected to provide permanent hospitality. So, while Doctor Thui was in England, it seemed to me that at least two courses of action should be followed without more ado. The first was to earn enough money to keep myself in food and clothes, if not for the moment in accommodation. The second was to make the first important moves in achieving that objective which had in the first place flown me out to Thailand: a Catholic maternity hospital.

The experience of the months gone by had served more than one useful purpose. They had certainly given me my first taste of responsibility in the day-to-day administration of a hospital, even though it was on piecemeal and ineffectual levels as in the Chinese institution. But above all these months had proved how real, how acute, how urgent, was Thailand's need. How our new hospital was to come about I did not know with any greater certainty than Doctor Thui, though I never doubted that by the grace of God and with His help we would eventually find our way.

It struck me while at Mass one morning that perhaps we were to some extent on the wrong track in hoping for some

mystical hospital building, not to mention funds, to materialize. We had so far given little or no thought to the vast vital job of providing training facilities for the local girls who would some day become our nurses and midwives.

That was it—a training school for Thai nurses and midwives. Easier said than done. But that, I decided, would have to be the basis of the plan I would put into operation while waiting for Thui's return to Bangkok.

It had never been our intention to establish a hospital solely for members of the Catholic faith. Both staff and patients would be inter-denominational. All the same we felt there was a definite need for a Catholic teaching staff, mainly to combat the practice of abortion which was accepted, even taught, in some other hospitals. Apart from two or three Government institutions and the French hospital, a big proportion of Bangkok's hospital resources consisted of small privately owned organizations, most of them Chinese. In fact anyone with enough cash could at that time open a private hospital with little more difficulty than starting a shop or cinema or similar commercial business.

The excellent French hospital was Catholic, of course, and it had one ward for the poor; but it was a general and not purely maternity hospital, catering for the most part for patients who could afford to pay. Among the poor of Bangkok and the rest of Thailand, first-class maternity facilities were still on a pitifully inadequate scale.

For my part I was also anxious to get Catholic girls of good education who would be willing to go to the up-country territories where nurses were so badly needed. Often in such places a pregnant woman had no one except an untrained and often unclean old woman of the village to attend her confinement, with results that can be imagined.

Where to begin was not easy. For several days I went around the city making a nuisance of myself with all those who would be interested and might be helpful. They

included the nuns of the Bangkok convent, the priests in all the parishes, a few business men I had got to know, including one or two Europeans, and I also visited the French bishop. All were sympathetic, but cool. The clergy were either too busy or too wary to take immediate practical steps, and the general attitude was rather one of waiting to see how the scheme developed once I had got things started.

Just as aggravating was the problem of some kind of employment to earn my living. The choice was obviously limited. My knowledge of the English language was probably my only saleable asset, so during several months to come the mornings were devoted to working in an office translating letters, and occasional afternoons giving English lessons to young Thai business men, their wives, a general and his wife, and several ladies of the diplomatic corps. These were all secondary occupations, however, and I saw them only as the means to starting my campaign.

To arouse enthusiasm in the community for our hospital it was essential to demonstrate that I was capable of something more concrete than talking and daydreaming. After much consultation with Siri and Phong, I began visiting the secondary schools, armed with hundreds of leaflets which I managed to get printed fairly cheaply.

Run mostly by the nuns, the girls' secondary schools in and around Bangkok catered for an intelligent type of young woman, many of whom came from good families. If only these girls would respond to my offer of a pre-nursing course of training, we would have at least the nucleus of a midwifery staff for the day our hospital came into existence.

My leaflet told them the bare facts about the project: that we hoped to establish a maternity hospital under Catholic management; that the hospital would be administered chiefly for the benefit of the poor; that we had, as yet, no building and that the prime need was to recruit potential nurses. It added that the training course would be free; that lectures would take place three times a week, for the study

of anatomy, physiology, hygiene, nursing methods and first aid. Girls willing to join had to be between sixteen and eighteen years old.

During the first fortnight I toured all the secondary schools, after gaining the permission of the authorities, and it was an exhausting chore to be performed in the Bangkok humidity. Resisting all temptations to take a tram or trishaw, I walked everywhere in a somewhat foolish effort to save every possible penny.

But the effort was superbly rewarded. Within a short time I had a class of no fewer than forty girls attending lectures in a room in the town which had been given over to me by Pee Yai. The lessons were in Thai and English, and after the course had been in progress for an entire school term I was on excellent terms of friendship with the girls.

I tried also to give the training school a happy recreational air by organizing occasional excursions to the seaside. Sometimes we went on a long bus ride, nearly two hundred miles out of Bangkok, to swim and play games on the beach for a few hours. All this created a valuable family spirit throughout the class. Siri and Yindi, who were among my lecturers, also gave up their time to come on the outings. At week-ends we would visit temples like the Buddhist shrine at Nakorn Prathom, an ancient ruin with a famous Buddha who supposedly refuses to allow the building of a roof over his head—at all events every roof so far tried has given way.

Many of the Thai girls in my pre-nursing class were not Catholics, but all had received their education with the nuns and had the basic idea of devotion to a task instilled in them. Even during the worst of the monsoon, attendance at the classes showed no signs of falling off.

Towards the end of the first half year, nevertheless, the girls were beginning to ask if there ever would be a hospital —and so, silently, was I.

Then, shortly before Christmas, I decided it was high

time to test the reactions of influential people in the various parishes of the city. The news of our classes had been noised abroad well enough, and Christmas was the crucial moment, it seemed to me, to launch a little social gathering.

We decided to stage a nativity play—to be spoken in Thai. Without much guidance from me, Siri translated it beautifully from the English. I issued invitations galore, including one to the bishop, and when the great night arrived I somehow felt certain our plan was safe when I saw the bishop enter the door, thus setting his seal—no mean influence—on the night's proceedings.

The play was a huge success. My girls performed magnificently and we had a live cow to represent the ox in the manger. There was also some good singing and plenty of dancing with Thai folk music. The whole pageant was performed on the lawn of Siri's and Yindi's house.

A few weeks later, with Doctor Thui returned from Europe, we were holding our first meetings to discuss with various priests and well-known citizens the formation of a committee to launch the maternity hospital, or at any rate to find ways and means of raising funds for the project. The bishop agreed to be named as our patron.

The committee was formed (though not so easily, I might add, as it takes to write it down) and we held our first meeting early in March 1949. As this period was known throughout the Catholic world as the month of St. Joseph, we determined to call the hospital—when we got it—St. Joseph's Maternity Hospital.

Before St. Joseph's month was ended I received an interesting offer. It came from a wealthy Chinese who owned one of Bangkok's small private hospitals.

Reading between the lines of his proposal it was clear that the hospital was far from profitable. Moreover, apart from the fact that the place was continuously running at a loss, which meant losing his own money, he was also losing face. He suggested, therefore, that in order to put the

hospital on the map once more, we should take over the maternity block. He would give us *carte blanche* to administer the place as we felt inclined. We could make whatever changes we wanted, even to changing the staff.

'It's too good to be true,' I told Thui. 'But it *is* true,' and we gave the Chinese owner our answer. We would take over what we would call St. Joseph's Maternity Wing, provided we could bring in our own staff, meaning some of the girls I had trained. This condition was accepted, and I spent the next few weeks in a mad rush of making bed linen, pillows and the like. We moved into the hospital premises on the first of June.

It was impossible to take all our Thai trainees at once so we installed our twenty most advanced girls as probationers and promised the others nursing jobs later on.

Fortunately for the new organization the small number of patients (there were only a few beds occupied during the first few weeks) meant that I could make headway with the important jobs of sorting out the hospital methods, the linen supplies, food and staffing problems and the like. All the same, I went sleepless for more than fifty hours during the first six days. This was partly due to a complicated emergency case who was rushed to us the very first night, partly to the fact that my Thai girls, though keen and willing, had no nursing background other than the lectures we provided. None knew even the most elementary laws of hospital procedure. Changing a baby's nappy was a world of experience completely outside their ken. Keeping the wards and the patients clean was not easy for these girls. Most of them were gentle adolescents to whom tasks like washing bed pans and laundering bloodstained linen was alien, to say the least. Those jobs, it should be remembered, were also alien to the whole concept of the nurse's role in Thailand. Bed pan duties, for some fantastic reason, were always left to the sweepers and labourers. I refused to have it so in my hospital and I was both surprised and

gratified that our Thai girls took to my methods in a spirited, workmanlike fashion.

From the start I was determined to run our affairs with, as near as possible, the efficiency of English training methods, including the insistence on nurses performing their own dirty work; and although my trainees were full of enthusiasm, I had to tread warily and be up and doing most hours of the day.

In that first week I lived, as they say, on benzedrine, removing my clothes only to take a bath.

Chapter Eleven

My Five Thousand Babies

A MERE dozen babies were born during our inaugural month at St. Joseph's.

Then the rate rapidly increased. In the second month there were twenty-five deliveries, followed by sixty. Before long we had our first month registering a hundred births, and after that it was a steady progress.

For quite a while I was compelled to supervise or more often to carry out the deliveries single-handed. Thui came every day to perform his rounds, but we had no full-time physician. This load was lightened, however, when we got our first resident doctor. Ampica was her name.

She was a charming slim-built Thai girl with vivacious eyes, a fine sense of humour, an enviable figure, and a lot of medical skill even though she was only recently qualified.

Doctor Ampica stayed two years before moving to a better post, and I was full of sadness when she went, for she notably strengthened our team. When she first came to us she was in her late twenties. She spoke quite good English, though her pronunciation was awful. One night, dealing with a very sick woman, I was standing at the bedside while Ampica examined the patient. Suddenly the doctor turned to me and spoke.

'Bloody fool, matron, bloody fool.'

I gasped, looking at her sharply, wondering if the remark were addressed to the patient or to me.

Seeing my confusion Ampica repeated her point, fortunately varying the words a little so I was no longer under any misapprehension.

'Bladder full,' she said again, 'bladder very full.'

Difficulties with adequate nursing labour continued for some time, and I was often obliged to do night duty when nurses were absent or on leave, or whenever we had insufficient qualified girls to cope with the work.

During one of these spells on night shift I had a particularly hectic time. All the beds of the labour ward were occupied. Two patients, both Chinese, were delivering their babies in the same hour. I had just about completed this operation and was getting the two women cleaned up and nicely comfortable when into the labour ward came a trolley bearing yet another woman who was well advanced in labour. With no vacant bed in the labour ward, and the newcomer about to deliver what midwives call 'the goods' at any minute, I decided there was no time for fussing. With some difficulty I picked up one of the two women who had just produced their babies—fortunately she was small and slender even by Chinese standards—and tottered with her in my arms to the ward next door. There I dumped her on one of the beds, told the nurse to keep her comfortable, and returned to the new patient in the labour ward.

Then the fun began. For some reason this woman, who was showing every sign of delivering her child, suddenly stopped the process. At the same time another Chinese mother-to-be began haemorrhaging badly. In the midst of coping with this one, a fourth labour-room inmate started to deliver her offspring.

By dawn I was practically asleep on my feet, with only a couple of probationers to help. At that point the last of the babies arrived. Reaching my room at long last I slumped into a chair and slept for six hours.

A different kind of fuss, with excellent results, was made by a poor Chinese woman who was already the mother of six. I had trundled her into the delivery room and on to the table when she began protesting loudly. I would kill her, she said, if I tried to make her deliver the child in this fashion. I asked how she thought it should be born, and was not surprised to learn that she was one of the thousands who were accustomed to squatting on the floor. Compared with her primitive ideas we had every modern maternity convenience surrounding her. But ignorance dies hard, and she was already climbing off the table when I decided to put my foot down.

'You cannot have your baby like that in *this* hospital,' I told her. 'Unless you get back on the table I shall send you home.'

Reluctantly the woman complied. We got on with the job. The birth was a beautifully simple affair.

When it was all over she gazed rapturously at her child, turned a beaming face on me, and said she had never known such an easy time before. She would tell the women of her neighbourhood that the hospital was the perfect place for having children. I do not know whether she carried out her promise of conducting our publicity, but I do know that she arrived less than twelve months later for her next child, and yet again within the year for another.

Of course the irony of the situation was that squatting is not at all a bad position for the delivery of a baby, provided conditions are sufficiently sterile. When they are not, different methods must be adopted; and although it is true that primitive women have for generations produced their offspring in the squatting position, it is a mistake to assume, as many people do, that the long-term results for mother and child are satisfactory.

Ignorance was not confined to the poor. We kept a couple of private rooms for those who could afford to pay, and one of these was occupied by a wealthy Chinese wife

who was relatively go-ahead in her attitude to ante-natal care.

She had arrived several days ahead to occupy her private room, and when, eventually, she went into labour her husband came to sit with her. I did not object to this, but told him he would have to stay outside when we took his wife to the delivery room for the actual birth. At this, both husband and wife went into a torrent of abuse. What did we think—that they should pay their money for a private room only to find their child was to be delivered like that of any peasant woman? The baby must be born in bed, right there in the room, said the husband, or mark his words he would raise this scandalous situation with the hospital committee.

In the end I just had to give way. The child was born, happily without any trouble. And since the father refused to quit the room I decided he might as well make himself useful. I had him rushing hither and thither, fetching and carrying until the sweat poured off him.

Again, we had no operating theatre and in some cases it was difficult to understand how the patient survived. One night, for example, a frail Thai woman was brought to the hospital in a state of exceptional weakness. She had suffered a tremendous haemorrhage, and I called in Siri as well as our resident physician Ampica.

We discovered it was a case of *placenta praevia*, the critical condition that is supreme in maternity, where the placenta, or after-birth, lies in the lower part of the uterus and perilously obstructs the delivery of the child. In modern practice it usually demands a caesarean section for which an operating theatre is essential, and we had, as I have said, no theatre.

Blood transfusions were vital, and Siri completed these shortly before midnight. The woman had already had twelve children, so her poor general condition was not surprising.

Siri told me: 'Keep an eye on her, but there is not much

hope. Unless the baby comes by four in the morning, I'm afraid she will die.'

Siri and Ampica returned to their respective quarters and I was left alone with the patient. I decided to stay with her until the end came.

The minutes ticked away. I sat holding the woman's hand.

At 1 a.m. she was still unconscious, looked weaker than ever, and there was no suggestion of a birth.

At 2.30 the poor creature's condition was unchanged. I began to pray for her.

At 3.30 she groaned and it looked as if the end was near. By 4 a.m. she would be gone, Siri had warned.

At ten minutes to four, she began moving, twisting, groaning. Then she was quiet again and I was no longer certain just what was happening. For a while I had thought the first contractions were taking place.

I sent for Ampica, who got out of bed, came to the ward, examined the woman and said: 'No, I do not think it is the baby. But be sure to call me if the pains grow stronger.'

The doctor did not even get as far as her room before the child began to arrive. Straining hard and powerfully, with more strength than I imagined she had in her, the mother delivered her child.

I sent a nurse rushing after Ampica, who returned just as the baby emerged.

There were no further complications. Next morning the woman was well and talking. Three days later she insisted on leaving us to go back to her husband and their large brood. The following year she was with us again for the birth of her fourteenth child.

As in hospitals the world over, visiting day was a kind of family festival for husbands, mothers-in-law, brothers, sisters, cousins and children. Sometimes they would *all* turn up, and I doubt if the average ward sister from an English hospital would find it easy to cope with the hordes

of Chinese who came bearing their affection and gifts to our mothers at Bangkok.

The most frequent visitor was mother-in-law, often accompanied by a gang of children. And mother-in-law was the culprit, I imagine, in the matter of a certain disconcerting practice. This stemmed from a popular belief that a newly-delivered mother should be fed with large quantities of meat which had been liberally soaked in wine.

The effect, so they said, was to enrich and promote the mother's breast milk.

At first I knew nothing of this piece of fascinating folklore. It was excusable, therefore, that I should be worried by the condition of a woman I found in one ward, looking red in the face, profusely sweating, and seeming to be inexplicably feverish.

I took her temperature, which turned out to be normal. I was then on the point of calling Ampica when the woman gave a series of loud hiccups. Bending over the bed, I caught a whiff of her breath.

'What is wrong?' asked Sukon, one of my Thai trainees.

'Nothing that time won't cure,' I said. 'She's drunk, that's all.'

Chapter Twelve

Battle for Survival

FOUR days before Christmas a small, doll-like Chinese woman, married to an ice-cream vendor who plied his trade around the streets and canals of Bangkok, gave birth to the identical twins who were to be christened, soon after I adopted them, Mary-Josephine, and Josephine-Mary—thereafter called Mary and Jose.

The parents were among the poorest of the thousands of Chinese immigrants who figure in the two million population of Thailand's capital city. The twins were just two premature scraps of humanity passing themselves off as babies, unwanted, and more frail than any I have ever seen.

Mary was born in the one-room hovel they inhabited. Jose was actually delivered in the tricycle-rickshaw that rattled through Bangkok on this December night in 1949, bringing her mother to the maternity hospital.

It was soon after midnight when they called me, and this was the second time within two or three hours that I had scrambled out from under my mosquito net, put on my white overall and hurried down to the labour ward.

'Premature twins, in very bad shape,' said Sukon, as we crossed the courtyard linking my quarters with the hospital.

My first glimpse of the twins, who weighed exactly two

pounds each and were more than two months premature, made me long for the day when our meagre resources would run to oxygen tents and an incubator. But in Bangkok we had no such refinements, and without them the prospects for this minute pair were about as skinny as their own poor little bodies.

How Jose survived even the first hour was something of a marvel. Her existence was not discovered till the mother was brought to the labour room, and the child when found was still encased in the membraneous sac of waters. A nurse had lifted the apparently lifeless bundle from the bed and placed it in a basin ready to be buried the next day.

But then, shortly before I was called to the ward, an observant student nurse—another young Thai girl from among my proud batch of trainees—looked into the receptacle, curious to study the mysteries of birth and stillbirth.

Suddenly the girl gave an excited shout, for inside the basin there was a movement that could only be the breathing of the child. Straight away the student called the midwife, and this was roughly the point when I arrived on the scene.

We tore open the membrane prison and removed the small creature. Like her sister she was just skin and bone, there seemed to be no subcutaneous fat whatsoever; they were both the size of scraggy spring chickens.

Yet somehow beneath the ugliness they were engaging, even with their large popping frogs' eyes, diminutive mouths, pointed noses and bony chins.

'Not much we can do for these poor mites,' I told the midwife. 'But maybe they will have a chance if we keep them warm.'

And for the next few hours that was all we did. I wrapped the twins in pounds of cotton wool till they resembled toy snowmen, placed them back to back in a cot, packed hot water-bottles around for extra warmth, and at 3 a.m.

returned to my room, after detailing a nurse to watch their colour and breathing and to call me again at the least sign of change.

Sleep was impossible, however, and before 6 a.m. I was once again inspecting the new arrivals in the baby ward. The twins were still breathing well, so I left them at rest, placing my trust in God and the cotton-wool casings.

For the next six weeks it looked as if neither nursing skill nor any divine intentions would give them even an extra ounce of weight and vigour. By the end of the first month, with the scales still registering the original two pounds, the pair were barely holding their own. Jose was all the time suffering severe stomach troubles, her life in particular for ever hanging by the proverbial thread.

To conserve their strength I would feed the milk to them through a pipette, though probably a bottle was anyway out of the question with such tiny mouths and almost total lack of muscular power. It was incredible, all the same, that as the days lengthened to weeks they became not one gramme heavier. I worried a lot, and went sleepless, and noticed the beginnings of an overwhelming personal desire for the continuing health of these unwanted products of the pretty Chinese doll and her street-hawker husband.

Unwanted they certainly were. Girl babies, viewed mainly as an economic liability, were at most times not welcomed by the poorer Chinese families. Twin girls were looked upon as positively disastrous. They were also omens of ill-luck, and although the barbaric custom has nowadays virtually disappeared it was not then unknown for such female babies to be found dead in a sack, tossed near a river bank or left in a doorway.

Eventually I was able to piece together the parents' story. The main items of their tragic history I learned from one of my student nurses who lived nearby.

They were 'married' by their respective families, it seems, while still in their own cradles at home in China—a practice

I believe which has not even yet died out. Then, when the boy was grown up, he came to Thailand—as so many hopeful Chinese were in the habit of doing—to earn his living. The wife would be sent to join him in due course.

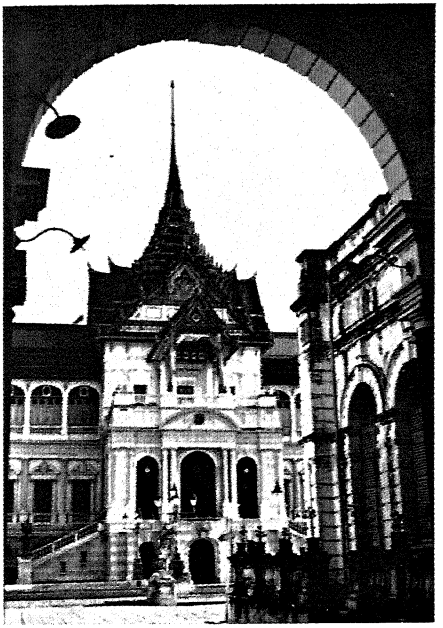
Se Thieng, as he was called, not only failed to prosper after settling in Bangkok but went farther and farther downhill, failed to find, or anyway to hold, a steady job, and was at last reduced to street-hawking.

For a long time he was just able to scrape a living by selling ice-cream, which he carried around each day in two heavy wooden tubs slung from a bamboo pole across his shoulders.

Then came the time for the young bride to join her husband. Her parents packed her off from their home at Swatow, and after an arduous journey she reached Bangkok, one more Chinese wife to swell the immigrant population of the Thai city.

What she expected to find no one can tell, but presumably home comforts were among her reasonable hopes in the new country. Instead, she discovered Se Thieng living and working under conditions that could spell only lasting poverty for both of them, and the shock of this unsuspected plight had a profound effect on her mental stability. Undoubtedly she was a deranged woman when she reached our Bangkok hospital, at which point she and Se Thieng had produced three other children apart from the rejected twins. About the twins' birth she was quite unconcerned, barely acknowledged them, and showed no signs either of bestowing motherly affection or even wanting to give them house room.

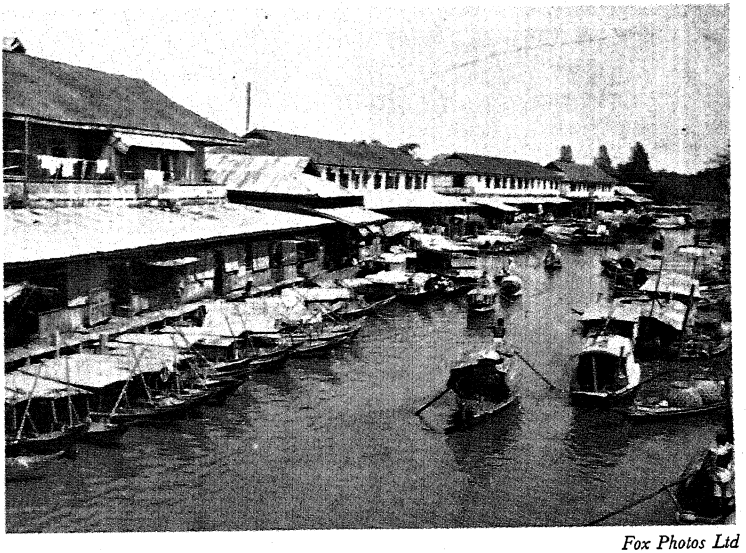
Se Thieng, who visited the hospital soon after the births, showed considerably more worry about their future than ever his pathetic wife displayed. From the start, in fact, he pleaded with me to adopt them. It was an odd coincidence that he should do so, for after living alone in the Far East during the greater part of twenty years, a growing sense of



The royal palace
Bangkok

Fox Photos Ltd

Some of the thousands of small native boats that use the Bangkok waterways



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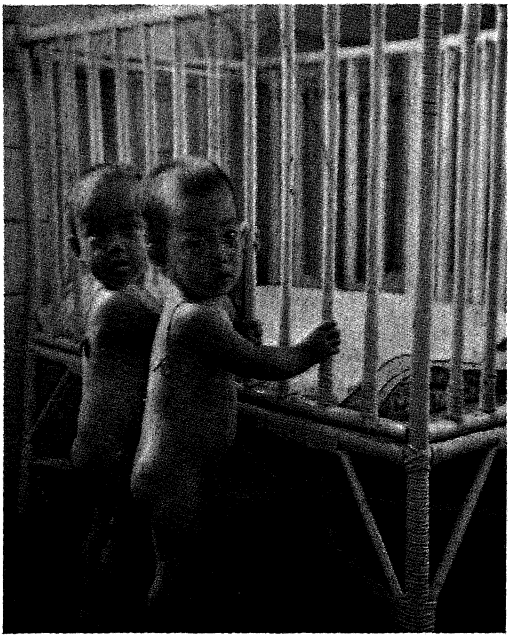
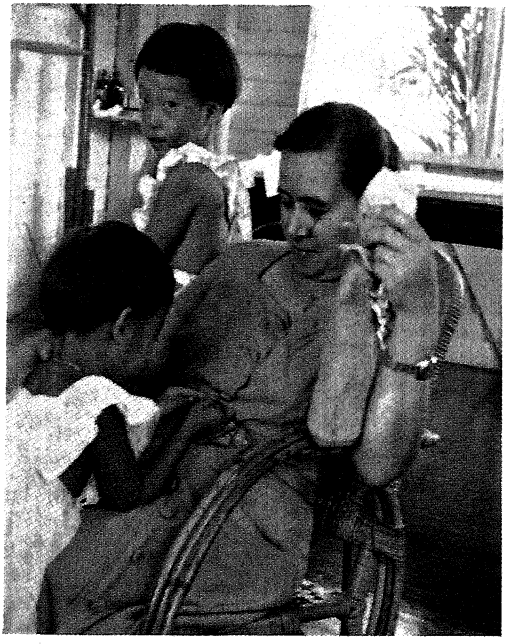
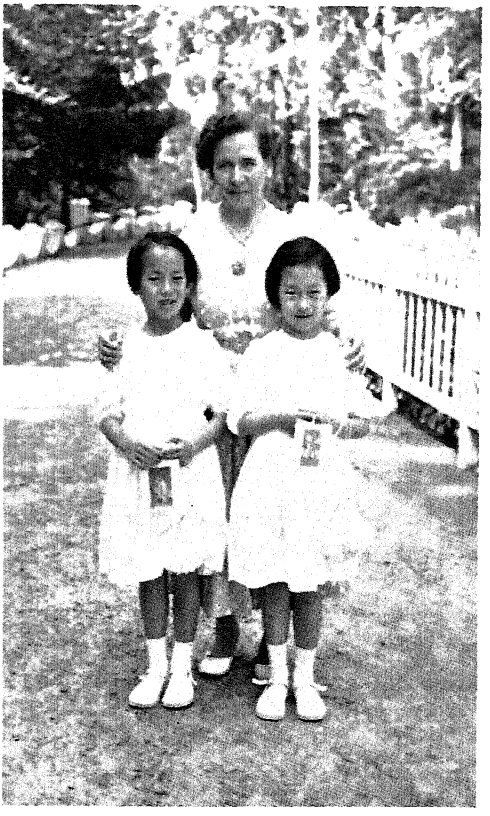
Four photographs of the
taken between the ages of



twins, Mary and Josephine,
five months and four years





The twins with the author on the day of their first communion

Mr. and Mrs. Peter Blackburn on their wedding day

loneliness had more than once put the idea into my head that I might adopt a child.

But I was already over forty, and I was also, as I kept reminding myself, a spinster with the background of a missionary, in which state I had spent the important decades of my life. Convents had been my school and home, the mud and heat and the problems of the poorest citizens of Thailand my sum total of experience. It was altogether absurd now to think of myself as a capable modern mother, and I usually dismissed the pipe-dream after reflecting that such an old maid was in no position to furnish those basic conditions of stability and happiness that children must know.

Certainly twins, and certainly Chinese twins, never entered into my reckoning, and Se Thieng's proposal was firmly refused. The most I would promise was that his babies could remain under my hospital care until they were strong and sufficiently developed to be sent to some public institution if he and his wife decided they still did not want them. With this assurance he was more or less content.

Interesting as I found the tale of Se Thieng and his hapless bride, my overriding concern almost every hour of the day was with the twins and their painfully slow progress. The mother was unable as well as unwilling to feed them, and anyway their needs demanded kid glove handling from morning till night.

After a few weeks the mere business of paying for their milk became a major problem. Se Thieng could not afford a penny towards it. Neither could the hospital. We were not only a new institution—the first of its kind in Thailand—we were also still suffering from a desperate shortage of funds and conducting all our work on a shoestring. My own salary, barely enough for the needs of one person, though I never minded that, certainly would not run to meeting the twins' milk bill.

For the first month I somehow managed, but then came

a sudden and joyful turning point which added to the embarrassment. Towards the end of the second month, both babies began gaining weight—ounces a day until at eight weeks, fantastically, they had doubled their original birthweight. I almost wept with delight.

The early crisis was providentially ended. Now it was a stirring experience to watch their tiny cheek muscles rapidly developing into firm round balls of baby flesh. There seemed to be new progress almost hourly. The small advances noted with satisfaction by every mother in the world took on the form of triumphant victories against heavy odds in the lives of our twins. Even the morning they were judged fit for promotion to bottle feeding was like some important day of festival on the calendar.

The milk problem remained, however. Several large tins of dried milk were absolutely essential each month, and it began to look as if they would not be forthcoming unless I bestirred myself, for this was Thailand, where there were no subsidized national welfare agencies to distribute free baby foods.

So I worked out a rough scheme for giving English lessons to Thai students and others in whatever spare time I could contrive. At first I was not particularly hopeful of its success as a money-earning device. My duties as hospital matron, with nearly all the student nurses virtually beginners, meant that I was on call right around the clock. The lessons would have to be conducted in my own room. Nevertheless, a start was made, the clientele gradually increased, and it was not long before the weekly takings were just enough to cover the milk bill.

Then as the twins flourished their needs also increased, and within a few weeks it was necessary to take on early morning as well as late evening pupils in order to make ends meet. During several years to come, what with ward duties, Thai training programmes, English language lessons, social work among the sick poor—and above all, the twins them-

selves—a full night's sleep was to be the rarest luxury. Yet all this was no more than a pinprick of hardship compared with the priceless contentment created by the twins in the years of their growth into healthy, handsome daughters.

The great decision to adopt them was made about the start of their sixth month. I had spent too many watchful hours filled with anxiety not to recognize the growth of a clearly maternal love for the pair. In the cool evenings I would take them for walks around the hospital garden, and in the course of such simple diversions the attachment became stronger than ever. Although at this stage they were still well below normal baby weight, they seemed to make up in character, even intelligence, what they lacked in muscle.

The actual moment of decision was probably one of pure sentimentality. I had taken the twins to my room after our evening jaunt, and sat for a while nursing them in a rocking chair. Soon they were both asleep in my arms.

Jose suddenly awakened. For a half-second there was a mildly started look on her face. Then she became aware of me and the whole expression changed. Her eyes, lazy, peaceful, and her lips, compressing in a series of blissful smiles, suggested the perfect peace that comes only with perfect confidence in maternal nursing and love.

The eyes closed again, the head drooped, the sleep was resumed. From that moment I determined to keep the twins as my own.

The arrangements for adoption were soon completed with Se Thieng. A single bed was brought to my room and divided with a partition, turning it into adequate twin cots. The students continued to come for their English lessons. The babies would either sleep through the sessions or lie awake with heads cocked, eyes wide open, as if they were taking it all in. With my Chinese twins I was the proudest parent in Thailand.

The day they were baptized produced an incident that also made me the most embarrassed parent in Thailand.

Soon after the adoption I carried the twins to the Chinese Catholic church in Bangkok. While standing outside in the sun a group of chattering women collected around us, interested to see the *farang*, or European, babies in the arms of their English mother. Glad to oblige, I showed them the twins, then watched the growing astonishment on their faces when they observed my children were Chinese.

The crowd began humming with gossip.

'Well, well, I suppose she has a Chinese husband. . . .' 'Yes, she married a Chinese. . . .' 'Have you see him? . . .' 'Who is he, what is his name? . . .' 'The *farang* woman has given birth to Chinese twins. . . .'

A minute later the priest came to my rescue. The women began bombarding him with questions to discover who was my oriental husband, and when at last he gained quiet he explained that the babies were adopted.

This news was in its way still more of a bombshell, for none of the group could grasp the picture of an Englishwoman wanting Chinese babies, twin girls into the bargain.

Another small uproar broke out. I was at once amused and horrified when I caught its meaning. The women were now offering me girl babies of their own. I could have had a dozen on the spot, probably twenty more if the first offer were accepted. But a well-stocked orphanage was nowhere among my plans, and I came away content with Mary-Josephine and Josephine-Mary.

Content, though not altogether without qualms. I was still perturbed about my fitness for the task, still suspicious of what I thought would be the old maid's tendency to spoil them, or be atrociously possessive, or give them a totally wrong outlook upon life, and a hundred similar fears.

The hard realities of everyday parenthood soon cut short my introspection. Teething troubles in all senses of the term came to our strange new *ménage* long before the twins' first year was up. Jose, always the weaker girl, always a pound or so in weight behind Mary, persisted with

her stomach ailments. Both children were inclined to be severely affected by temperature changes.

One day while I was nursing them a bad storm blew up, and before there was time to shut the windows the wind and a little rain were sweeping in upon us. Next morning Mary and Jose were running high temperatures; before long they had developed bronchial pneumonia.

There began a terrifying new vigil, marked by a new fear that after all we had come through together, this was the end of their brief lives. But it was not the end, and thanks to the wonder drugs of our time even the delicate twins were able to rally and survive the ordeal.

At about nine months I decided they were robust enough to begin weaning them. It turned into a somewhat comic process.

To start them off I tried one of the best-known reliable baby foods, but neither Jose nor Mary would have any of it. I went shopping again and returned with a tin of another famous branded line. This too proved useless.

In the days that followed I was feeding them in turn with every modern baby food on the market, and still the twins were unable to get the stuff down. Groats, semolina, various *purées*, all the conventional preparations, were a failure.

'Perhaps a real old-fashioned diet will do the trick. I think I will give them bread and milk,' I told my colleagues.

But bread and milk, even when prepared with absurdly lengthy devotion, were no more effective than the rest. In desperation I then tried mashed potatoes and milk. It was all quite hopeless—the twins seemed bent on rejecting every diet known to the civilized world of infant welfare. Now at my wits' end, I stood watching them one morning as they lay, still noticeably frail, in their adjacent cots.

Then came the great brainwave. It might have been due to some momentary awareness of their Chinese features—I do not know. But it struck me suddenly as I looked into

their small faces that there was only one further course to adopt. Come what may, I would give them the unadorned version of their own national dish. Plain boiled rice.

It worked like a charm. From that day Mary and Jose lapped up bowls of boiled rice with the eagerness of five-year-olds gobbling jellies at a birthday party. The weaning of the twins was solved.

This was not the last, nor the most strange, of their dietary foibles. At another stage I was forced to conclude that some more or less hereditary factor may have played a part in the feeding troubles. When they were old enough to eat adult foods, for example, the twins always preferred dried fish and salt fish to any fresh variety. Similarly, they chose salt eggs rather than fresh. These were not things I habitually prepared for my own meals, so it was no mere question of their demanding what mother was eating. As in the boiled rice episode, dried fish and salt eggs were a last resort. Very gradually, as the twins grew older, their tastes became more catholic and 'normal'.

We were never long between one crisis and the next. In the twelfth month I noticed both girls developing enlarged glands on each side of the neck. I wondered if the glands were tuberculous, and without delay the twins were despatched for X-ray.

It was T.B. The battle was on again.

This time, though, the prospect was always reasonably bright. Up-to-date treatments turned the old scourge into a temporary setback, and after many trying months the glands subsided.

What torments the two children suffered, nevertheless, with daily injections of the drugs that were eventually to thrust off T.B. After a while their buttocks became so stiff from continual hypodermic jabs that it was impossible to sit them on their pots without causing agony. One resolution I made and kept: never to administer the injec-

tions myself, for I was afraid that once they began associating me with a hypodermic needle they would not allow me to handle their more trivial ailments in the future.

Throughout their infancy Mary and Jose preserved one striking attribute. They had incredibly smooth, velvety skins and perfect complexions, unblemished by the spots and sores commonly seen in these countries.

As time progressed it was also a lot easier to tell them apart. They were so indistinguishable as babies that sometimes even I had to turn them upside down to compare the Mongolian birthmarks on their bottoms. Later, however, they developed more convenient differences and nowadays I see only the smallest likeness. Mary, with an oval-shaped face, retained a more definitely Chinese look about the eyes. Jose had an altogether longer face and more prominent forehead.

Often during the first year Se Thieng would visit us. There was no doubting his affection for the twins, and I think he wanted to satisfy himself that they would be contented in my care. After a while I gently stopped these visits, explaining the importance of creating a family unit in which the children knew they belonged to me. Se Thieng intelligently grasped this point. For the next few months, with only occasional visits, he would stand watching them from afar. Then he stopped coming altogether. Doubtless he was anxious to believe, too, that I was not the type to use them merely as servants as soon as they were grown strong and old enough to fetch and carry, as often happened when Thai families adopted children.

In fact, there had been many visitors to the hospital who toyed with the idea of adopting them. But there was always some unacceptable condition, either they would want to separate the twins, or else they had consulted fortune-tellers only to find the time was unpropitious. For one reason or another they never did make up their minds, and for that I was soon truly thankful.

Only once was serious consideration given to a plan for adoption by others. This was when the twins were a year old and the potential parents two of my closest friends, an English social worker, Rupert, and his wife, Patty. For some time they had wanted to adopt a baby and even contemplated bringing an English child out to Thailand. This step was found to be impracticable, whereupon we discussed the possibilities of their adopting Mary and Jose.

Even though the twins were already mine I think I would have yielded them to Patty if the practical problems had been less troublesome. It so happened that Rupert and she were soon to return to England, and they were justifiably worried by the effects of such an upheaval upon the children. Nor were they certain that twins might not prove one too many for them—so the plan was abandoned.

Before leaving Thailand, Rupert and his wife made a fine gesture. They decided to take upon themselves the old financial burden of the milk bill, depositing money with me for that purpose. I put it aside in the form of a trust fund for the twins, and with the occasional help of other good friends we managed to meet our commitments as the years went by.

In character Mary and Jose were soon emerging as individuals. Often with twins, I am told, there is a tendency to switch various facets of temperament from time to time, and this was certainly true in the early years when they seemed to be switching almost month by month. If one went into a quiet phase the other would loudly demand attention. In general, Mary was to become the more assertive and Jose the reserved child.

Among their idiosyncrasies was a fussy insistence on cleanliness. If food were spilled on their clothing, nothing short of a change of dress would satisfy them. At one stage this over-fastidiousness ran to an insistence that Mary's spotless frock should be changed even when Jose's was the only soiled one.

Only for a short time was any special interest shown in dressing exactly alike—'otherwise we are not twins.' When this ended, Mary characteristically insisted on outfits in her favourite colour, which happened to be blue, while Jose was invariably content with whatever colours were nearest at hand.

Perhaps the most interesting manifestation of their origins and their Thai environment was found in a shy resistance to speaking English in my presence. Right from the start I had always addressed them in English, which they understood well—yet always they answered in Thai. And again, whenever it was necessary for them to converse with others in the English language, I noticed they would watch me closely to see if I were listening.

With all the ills and handicaps I suppose it would not have been in the least surprising if they had turned into persistently difficult child personalities. Long before reaching school age they were certainly displaying a fair quota of healthy misbehaviour, yet under truly galling conditions they were gratifyingly stable, gentle and undemanding.

On 21st December 1953, for example—Mary's fourth birthday—she was clearly sickening for something. By Christmas Day we were a sad trio indeed. The child had typhoid. About the middle of that morning we sang our family version of birthday wishes to the infant Jesus. Jose stood by the door facing the rocking chair where I sat with her sick twin in my arms, and in a weak thin tone Mary joined in the 'happy birthday' chorus. It was all agonizingly touching, of course, but even more marked was the child's air of tolerant resignation, as if some paradoxical wisdom made her aware of the accumulated ill-luck pursuing the twins since their birth.

Despite my unwillingness to indulge in what is commonly viewed as 'forcing' religion into the young mind, they were an oddly pious pair of children at quite an early age. Attachment to my religion was obviously a part of the story,

for they were soon aware of the fact that I went often to church and was never inclined to make a secret of my faith in the power of prayer.

Sometimes in Bangkok they would accompany me to church, and it was not long before confession began to pose problems that were both puzzling and comical. At first they would wait at one side in the church while I knelt at the confessional. Then they too would insist on kneeling where they stood, and return home to announce with great satisfaction their attendance at 'confession'.

A year or two later, when they were able to grasp a little more of its meaning, they began pestering me to declare whatever it was I had 'done wrong'. Shamelessly evading this issue I tried to explain that they would eventually understand the full meaning of the confessional, and would surely take part in it themselves.

'In fact, you will go to confession for the very first time just before making your first communion,' I concluded.

The twins reacted unexpectedly and with one voice.

'But *we* haven't done *anything* wrong,' they chorused, 'so there would be nothing for us to confess.' And for the moment I had to leave it at that.

It was Jose, on another day, who produced the most unforgettable of their childish moments of confusion. Returning from church she was silent and thoughtful. On reaching home I asked the reason.

Jose blurted out her momentous question, 'Why does father always say "Pussy Be Good", and why do the people in church say after him, "Pussy Be Good"?'

It was a full minute before I regained my composure.

'Pussy Be Good' was her rendering—and who would call it irreverent—of a phrase intoned by priest and congregation in the recitation of the Divine praises.

The phrase was 'Blessed Be God'.

That the design of events governing the birth of the

twins was God-made, I do not doubt. The eye of Heaven roves mightily across the universe, and only Heaven knows what makes it pause upon Bangkok or Birmingham, upon an individual man, woman, bird or beast.

I do not doubt that Heaven's eye alighted upon Se Thieng's pathetic wife, and upon me, during that night of December when the twins were born. Certainly among the hundreds of babies delivered thus far, none was so sadly without hope of survival as these two-pound creatures for whose plight Sukon roused me from my bed.

I said earlier that I had placed my trust in God and the cotton-wool casings in which I wrapped the weakly pair but God's love, in fact, was all I could honestly count on; and when the two babies were seen to be staying alive, what became intensified was my praying, rather than the maternity care that was lavished on their cot. There were no recent modern advances in the entire world of medicine which guaranteed much of a chance for the lives of Mary and Jose.

The summer of the following year was almost at an end when Se Thieng, whose doll-wife had shown so little interest in her twin girls, completed the adoption arrangements and stopped his visits to the hospital. And by the time Mary and Jose were three or four years old I was not only their legal mother, I was also a considerably changed woman. Their existence showed one thing most clearly. If ever I imagined that my departure from the cloister was the sole major turning point of my life, the twins proved otherwise. Until their arrival the fundamental drives in my way of living had not changed at all in their essentials. I was still behaving, feeling, thinking like a missionary, and never fully understanding that a mere casting-off of the religious habit was not the real sign of ceasing to be a nun.

Ever since my return to Thailand almost every conscious thought and act was concerned in one way or another with motherhood. Yet although each tiny creature who passed

through my hands was the work of God, was I perhaps laying too much emphasis on those manifestations of God's work that lay outside myself? Having at last become an ordinary woman, was I ignoring, pushing into oblivion, those longings and urges which formed the real reason for wanting this womanhood? Up to that Christmas night I had had no conscious feelings of self-pity about the prospect of a protracted lonely spinsterhood, but I imagine the fear was never far away.

At all events the twins changed a good deal more than a way of life. Mary and Jose were soon diverting my mental and emotional processes into altogether new channels. Now also for the first time, future as well as present was becoming important.

On the whole our results at the hospital were satisfying. One year we had delivered two thousand babies, losing only ten, all of those ten premature; and in handling since the day of our inauguration a total of more than five thousand maternity cases we lost only six mothers and fewer than fifty infants.

We had travelled a long way in a short spell. My first group of Thai student nurses passed their examinations with flying colours. Our fame had spread sufficiently to spur the King's uncle, Prince Dhani, to distribute the diplomas on the great day of celebration. Every girl in the second and third batches of trainees was also successful in her examinations.

With our prestige assured I was already beginning to think of switching my energies to some other field of work. Once more, however, the shape of things to come was governed by one of those strokes of ill-luck to which I was accustomed: another sudden illness. I collapsed while on duty one day and was put to bed—hospital patient instead of hospital matron—where I remained for a month. There was no denying that more than three years of the hard labour that was essential to keep St. Joseph's thriving had taken their toll. It was another bout of heart trouble.

And it was just at this stage that important changes were made in the hospital organization. Two European doctors joined the staff of our Chinese institution and a site was found for the real St. Joseph's Maternity Hospital, to which end I had worked for so long in company with Thui, Siri, Yindi, Phong and Ampica. It seemed strange that I should relinquish my post just as the goal was in sight. But the pioneering work was done; I was also badly in need of a rest, and on top of all this the bishop himself was proposing a difficult new project for me to grapple with.

He wanted me to start work, as soon as my convalescence was ended, among the sick poor of the surrounding parishes. I was to launch a kind of domiciliary nursing service, its ultimate aim to recruit yet more Thai girls to work for the sick and ailing in their own homes. First I was to enjoy two whole months of leave. The hospital committee paid half my expenses, the bishop paid the other half; and off I sailed to England, leaving the twins in St. Joseph's hospital care.

For the first time in more than thirty years I spent a Christmas with my sisters in England. They were interested and a little alarmed to hear that I was the mother by adoption of Chinese twin girls. I vaguely promised that one day I would bring Mary and Jose to Britain so that they could see and be seen. Then I flew back to Bangkok, wept over the twins when I realized how deeply we had missed each other, and set about my new task.

Chapter Thirteen

The Old Men and the Twins

STANDING on the mud in a field of paddy, about twenty minutes' walk from the Bishop's house, was a cluster of wooden huts which had been erected for a few of Bangkok's homeless poor by the society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Two huts were unoccupied, and it was there, with the consent of the priest in charge, that I decided to establish in a small way my first home for ailing aged women; there were no old people's homes in Thailand and the need was every bit as great as for good maternity centres.

As things turned out, it became instead a home for ailing old men. Poverty-stricken as they were, the Thai and Chinese women to whom I offered the first places reacted with hostile suspicion; they were clearly afraid that I was intending to run the place as a business. They need not have worried, for I was worth, in hard cash, little more than they and my instinct for money-making about as developed as that of my four-year old twins.

The bishop had loaned me a small house, next door to his own, where I lived with Mary and Jose and a young Thai girl who worked for me as maid and housekeeper. Not that I could afford a domestic servant, but if I were to spend half my days attempting to build a kind of one-woman welfare organization it was essential to have

someone at home keeping an eye on the twins during my absences.

After settling in with Mary and Jose, I began surveying the parishes. To save money I walked everywhere, and apart from the difficulties of finding suitable sites for the old people's home, I learned it was no simple matter to wear down local feelings of distrust.

Nearly three months passed in this fashion, at the end of which I realized with a shock that my slender savings were rapidly dwindling to naught. So the old standby—English lessons for students and businessmen—was again resorted to. Together with occasional sorties to give chiropody and remedial massage to a few private patients, they earned just enough to cover our expenses. The teaching and the treatments, if any, were usually carried out in the afternoons. Early each morning I would sally forth on the long hot walks in the cause of the welfare campaign.

From a remnant of some green material I made a type of uniform dress, conveying the idea of community service by embroidering the word *Serviam* on the blouse. People were soon recognizing my somewhat dumpy figure in the streets or along the *klongs*; quite often I would be stopped to receive news of some particularly deserving case.

For several hours each week I also called on local business houses to beg for the poor—not so much for money as for gifts, such as milk foods for babies, sample medicines for the sick. The response was magnificent.

The main effort, however, was concentrated on developing the huts in the paddy field for the use of my old men. The first to come was a pathetic, wheezing Chinese more concerned about his son, who was dying from T.B. though he did not know it, than for his own plight.

I had already hired a carpenter to convert the two shacks into a single unit, and within a month the hut had a full complement of six men, including a couple of Thais, their ages ranging from sixty to eighty. The eldest was known

as Ah Thea, or Father, and the wickedest but also the most lovable was undoubtedly Ah Cheng, a wiry little man who was a bit of a drunkard whenever he could lay his hands on liquor.

It was good to watch their growing sense of security and the disappearance of the stamp of loneliness. There was no piped water supply in the hut; they fetched water in buckets from a tap some distance away; there was neither gas nor electric light; there were certainly no comfortable chairs. But for all the lack of amenities, they felt cared for.

I loved my old men dearly, from the start visiting them every day. The monsoon broke soon after they were installed, and as luck would have it I was caught by the first storm when I was half-way through the paddy field. In the pelting torrent, my macintosh, shoes and goloshes were more hindrance than help. Stumbling through the mud I lost both goloshes within seconds, then a shoe, then the remaining shoe. Long before reaching the old men's hut I had several times fallen headlong in the mud, and to make matters worse there was no way of avoiding a certain stretch of flooded sewage through which I had to pass on both the outward and homeward journeys.

Next day, and for months afterwards while the monsoon season lasted, I went barefoot, though that did little to reduce the number of squelching tumbles into paddy-field mud. Each day's trek to the huts meant a complete change of clothing when I reached home shortly before noon.

At the beginning I gave the old men money to buy their food; they did their own cooking on a small battered oil stove.

The periodic hand-out of cash was soon stopped when I discovered that Ah Thea, a wily old bird, was causing jealousy among his fellow boarders through his friendship with an elderly Chinese woman who lived in a nearby bamboo hut. Ah Thea prevailed on the woman to go daily to the market and do his shopping. It would obviously not

be long, thought the others, before she also began cooking for him; and that was only a short step from the day she moved right into their precious hut. To avert the intolerable situation I made new rules, insisting that the men kept strictly to a rota for their cooking and chores while I took over the shopping.

The rains continued to be an ordeal, and I think my intense hatred of mud was born in those days, a hatred far deeper than the normal distaste which mud and slime provoke in most people. One day while on the trip to the hut I was sure I had found a comparatively simple new pathway, wet and uncomfortable like all the others but at least safe enough to plod barefoot without falling every fifty yards or so.

I had trudged only a quarter of a mile when I came to a steep bank at the bottom of which was a brown filthy stream.

Loaded with the old men's market shopping—three baskets of groceries and vegetables—I thought that by walking in a semi-crouched position it would still be possible to negotiate the edge of the muddy bank that stretched some thirty yards ahead.

Two, three, five steps. Then I began to slither. Even without the baskets it was doubtless impossible to stop the slippery descent, but with them I tumbled the more rapidly down the sloped twenty feet of mud, landed in the stream below, and lost everything. The job of clambering to level ground took me another twenty minutes.

Like most Chinese my old men never tired of drinking tea at all hours of the day. Soon it became a costly pastime and I was forced to tell them I could no longer afford to buy tea in such quantities as they habitually needed to consume. Wondering how they would react I then announced my scheme to earn their tea and cigarette money by working with their own hands. For several weeks I had been asking friends everywhere in the city to save unwanted

magazines and newspapers, and now I had a vast collection heaped in a cart which we dragged to the hut. With the old men grouped around me I then sat demonstrating how they could manufacture simple paper bags from the pages of newsprint.

They took to this task with great enthusiasm as soon as I said: 'When you have made a thousand bags I will go into the market and sell them to a shopkeeper.'

Output immediately soared. For months afterwards our paper bag industry was kept alive with the co-operation of a half-a-dozen Bangkok stallholders and shop proprietors. We received only a few *ticals*, then worth about sixpence, for every thousand bags, but with six men labouring several hours a day the weekly production was enough to buy a pound or two of tea and a few cigarettes. Far more important to my mind was the fact that it kept them occupied, reduced the dreary loneliness of old age, kept lethargy at bay, and gave them an active sense of purpose. It was wonderful to see how their manhood and self-respect were restored with a little dignified work.

'No longer do we eat idle bread,' Ah Thea said to me.

Only Ah Cheng remained a problem. He worked in fits and starts and was off into town as soon as he had a few *ticals* in his pocket. At the beginning I was unaware of Ah Cheng's drinking habits, knowing only that he drank surprisingly little tea for a Chinese, that he was sometimes sluggish in his speech, and rather red-nosed. But one day I found him fighting with the others and I could smell the liquor from the doorway. I warned him he could not stay if he went on drinking and straight away he promised me on the moon and stars that he would never touch a drop in the future.

Only a day or two later, returning from Mass, I saw the old boy walking by the *klong* near the bishop's house, carrying a bottle under each arm. As we drew level he hurriedly transferred the bottles to one hand which he then

held behind his back. With the free hand he waved extravagantly, delivered me a gallant bow, and broke into a stream of flowery compliments. I could not help laughing at his antics, but then I became stern and said: 'Stop kidding me, Ah Cheng. I know you have bottles behind your back.'

'But I do not spend your money on tea, Mem,' he said.

'Perhaps not—but why two bottles? Can't you make do with one?' I nagged.

Ah Cheng held out the bottles, one in each hand. 'This one,' he said, 'is because I do not drink tea, Mem. And this one, because I do not smoke, Mem.'

He grinned at his little joke, hoping I would smile on him once more, which of course I did. If Ah Cheng had not been Chinese he would have found it easy enough with his engaging blarney to qualify as an Irishman.

Though the old men were modest enough in their requirements, still I needed money for their food each day. No official sanction had been given to the old people's home, but as in the case of my nursing school the public interest was soon aroused once the scheme flourished.

At first there was no alternative but to beg gifts from my friends. Then somehow word got around and money started to come in without my asking for it. A few well-wishers even insisted on making small monthly contributions.

Miraculously, I was never totally without funds for the old men. Mary and Jose included them in their prayers night and morning, and were convinced the gifts I received were largely due to their efforts. One evening while considering how much I could afford to spend next day on buying rice and tea, I heard a whispered conference going on in the corner of the living-room veranda. The twins were solemnly discussing how to raise funds. Next morning, when I returned from my visit to the paddy field, two envelopes heavy with coins lay on the table. The regular subscribers had not let me down. What surprised me, however, was the twins' attitude.

Mary and Jose pranced around the table as I slit the envelopes and the coins fell out.

'We got the money!' they crowed with delight.

'How?' I enquired.

'We asked St. Joseph,' said Mary with pride. 'We told him the money *must* come today, and here it is.'

It was not long before applications for admission to our home for the aged far exceeded the accommodation available. Some of the old women I had originally intended to house were now filled with regrets and begged me, when they saw me in town, to make room for them too. But there were no more huts to be had, and in any case during the dry season the water tap near the huts had failed. We then dug a well, but the water was too brackish. We would be short of water until the monsoons came again, and then the problem of the mud would loom once more.

The thought of the mud spurred me to action. Always the road to progress led to the bishop.

'What is it now?' was his long-suffering greeting when I presented myself. He seemed resigned, I was happy to note, that I could give him no peace.

He listened patiently as the latest ideas were unfolded and I came away from our meeting triumphant. I had achieved a threefold victory.

First, he approved in principle a plan to build a home for old people in the grounds of the house I was then occupying.

He was also prepared to approach the nuns of the Little Sisters of the Poor with a view to their eventually running the proposed home.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, I was to be allowed to transfer my six old men, lock, stock and barrel from their present shack in the paddy field to the comfort of my own house. To them it would bring a taste of luxury—for me it would mean an end to the daily mud baths.

The men were installed in a large room which became

their dormitory. They did their own cleaning and my maid prepared their meals as well as those for the twins.

Mary and Jose were delighted with the new arrangement. Very soon our back veranda, the coolest spot during the heat of the day, was bustling with activity. Paper bag making went ahead as of old, and for the twins the group of elderly men were a new source of interest. The small table at which the girls had their meals was moved as close as possible to the large trestle affair occupied by the old men. A pleasant peacefulness was in the air, and I think Mary and Jose brought a new joy into their lives, the almost forgotten pleasure of contact with innocence and youth.

The trouble was we had a mere half-dozen inmates, a puny effort considering the need for a truly big home. I was constantly turning down requests to house this or that deserving old person, and was all the time wondering how to expand the work.

One day an architect friend offered to draw some rough plans for an old people's home which might suitably be erected in the large garden of the house the bishop had loaned me. It was certainly an idyllic spot, surrounded on three sides by *klongs*, and right next door to the French hospital.

The drawings gave an inspiring glimpse of the ideal, but drawings were not bricks and mortar, and there was no available money for construction. Once again, therefore, I decided to call on the bishop, to seek his permission to post myself at the doors of Bangkok churches so that I could do my own begging from local worshippers. Once again he agreed.

It was not an enjoyable or dignified task. Never before had I stood in the streets with a begging bowl, and the fortitude required for the physical strain of it was the least part of the effort. Nevertheless, it looked as if no other method would raise much money so I had no choice but to

steel myself daily for the campaign which I conducted in different parishes each morning.

I stood with my bowl outside all of Bangkok's churches in turn during the next few weeks, and was agreeably astounded by the response. Within a month or so I managed to raise nearly six thousand *ticals*, which in those days was more than one hundred and fifty pounds sterling. It was a good tribute to the generosity of Catholics in a Buddhist country.

I doubt if any of the donors knew that the faith they supported had remained in their land only after some heroic efforts by the pioneers. In fact, the faith reached Thailand as far back as the early seventeenth century under the religious banner of the Portuguese, but then it had declined, or been literally murdered, during a fierce persecution; and not until the French arrived was Catholicism firmly established. The first French Catholic priests to enter Thailand actually walked from Paris, a trek that lasted two years. One man died within hours of reaching Bangkok, another a few weeks later.

I was forced to conclude, though, that some of the leaders of our present-day church were not showing themselves to be models of initiative and energy. True, a fairly impressive array of good works had been built over the years, but I was often impatient with what seemed to me unnecessarily slow progress in many fields of social welfare and ministration by the religious community to the sick and poor. On this topic I had many an argument with the French priests of Bangkok, and even to the bishop tended to express my impatience with the snail's pace of advancing health or welfare projects of the type I had for years tried to foster.

The fact was, they consistently practised what they preached—'We must go carefully and slowly in such a country'—and it was a philosophy that made me see red. To one influential priest I said: 'The sun has got into you,

as it has got into the Thais and many another Far East peoples. You have built a few schools and many churches but you have not done anything like enough for the unfortunates among the native population.'

In the same way I found the priests markedly over-conservative about the design of Bangkok's newest church. This was a fine edifice built by the American Redemptorist fathers, who boldly and aptly decided to construct the church in a modern Thai style rather than on the conventional lines of European houses of worship. The failure of the French-dominated Catholic community to move with the times was perfectly illustrated in the hot controversy that was thrown up by this architectural innovation.

Everything in and about the church was designed with clear pure lines, almost streamlined, and with tremendous dignity and power. All in the Thai style. A Christian temple of the 1950s, if ever there was one. The paintings and murals, the doorways, the altar, even the monstrance, the vessel of gold or silver in which consecrated bread is placed, were of up-to-date Thai design.

The priests with whom I habitually argued were horrified when they heard the details of the American-built church. 'It looks like a latter-day Buddhist temple,' said one. 'They will never persuade *me* to enter it,' said another. And controversy over this gem of a church was also raging in the newspapers.

When I told the priests that the Christian faith did not have to show Western trappings everywhere, suggested that Thai architecture was a brilliant idea for the new building, and finally asked, 'What makes a church—is it the stone, or the Presence?' several of a more conservative hue virtually accused me of blasphemy. I noticed, all the same, that one priest who swore he would never enter the place had put himself well to the fore of the locally distinguished congregation at the blessing of the new church.

As for the twins, they loved churches and religious ritual

no matter what the design, though the channels of thought into which Mary and Jose were directed did not always take a religious form. Once on a Sunday, for example, they saw the bishop leaving for Mass. He was a short man with a noticeably protruding paunch.

'When he lies in his bed,' said Jose, 'I am sure his tummy touches the ceiling. That must be great fun.'

Chapter Fourteen

Good-bye to Thailand

To the bent, ill-dressed Chinese, a man of about sixty who stood at the door of our house when I was returning from market, I said, 'I am sorry, old man, but we cannot take you in. There is no more room in the house.'

It was not uncommon for such destitute characters to descend on us in person. I usually listened to the heart-rending accounts of their plight, which invariably ended with the appeal that I should take them into the house along with the other old men. But it was true, I had no prospects of accommodating extra bodies for a long time to come, and the bishop was already viewing with a certain distaste the presence of the six elderly males in my home, which was after all his house. So a somewhat hard-hearted rejection, and a vague promise that one day in the distant future there might be a good home available, was all I could offer these begging visitors.

As I spoke, the old man turned his back, shielding his face with one hand. I moved nearer, thinking he was about to weep, when suddenly the truth dawned on me. He was a leper, and his condition was fearful. Not only face and arms were badly affected; there were running sores all over his body, as I soon discovered after walking with him to the hut where he lived with one of his daughters.

His wife and the rest of the family, it emerged, had long since left him. He and the daughter were now desperate, for their landlord wanted to tear down the shack to make room for a row of new dwellings.

The daughter, who kept their two small rooms extraordinarily clean, was fighting a noble battle to care for him, but neither she nor the departed wife had ever attempted to get the old man into the Government leper colony that was located some way down the Chao Phya River.

Over the next few weeks I visited the man as often as possible, dressed his sores, and tried generally to encourage him with stories of the new drugs that were already helping the unhappy thousands suffering from the scourge. Meantime I pulled all the strings I could find to get him admitted to the Government colony; it was not a simple matter in a place already housing hundreds and with new admissions at a premium. After numerous interviews, however, I did get him accepted. The ambulance called, I went with him as far as possible by road, then we transferred to a small boat for the river trip leading to the colony.

It was a pleasant spot down-river, with huts built on stilts so that underneath each dwelling there was a sheltered haven from the heat. The inmates, three or four to a hut, tried as far as possible to be self-supporting, growing their own vegetables and other produce. Attached to the colony was a leper hospital into which my man was placed. In less than a month I returned on a visit to find him greatly improved.

This first contact with a leper seemed to have been publicized for it was not long before another victim arrived at our house—a stooped, miserable, ashamed man who was all but beaten as a human being by his ailment.

Unfortunately he was also homeless, without even a place to sleep when he arrived. A little fearfully I took him into the house and let him sleep on a floor. I say fearfully because it is the natural and common reaction, though

leprosy is not the dangerously contagious disease most people think it to be, and in fact a fairly prolonged association with a leper would be needed before the contact were affected by the disease.

The next day I took him on the ferry-trip down the river to the colony, where I had great difficulty persuading the authorities to accept him. Again, the improvement after a short stay in the settlement was remarkable. When I saw him later I barely recognized the upright man who now looked me straight in the eyes, compared with the pitiful half-man who came for help.

My fortnightly journeys to the leper colony took up the best part of a day, for the bus and boat trips alone lasted two hours. First I went by bus to the riverside, then took a motor launch to a point where I disembarked and walked overland for a while, finally taking a queer little coracle-shell of a boat rowed by a native woman. She would stand in the stern with one leg trailing in the water to act as a rudder. People along the river stared to see a lone European woman with a native female pilot, but I always enjoyed this part of the trip.

Occasionally I would also take the twins, though not as far as the leper colony. They remained in the care of Chun, my maid, while I carried out my tour of the settlement.

With all these jobs to perform it was worrying to have Mary and Jose going through their own trials of sickness, the T.B. glands, typhoid, and the hundred-and-one lesser ailments that were always holding back the prematurely-born twins, who not only took a long time to increase their birth-weights of two pounds, but were several years in the process of catching up with other children of their own age.

It was a considerable shock, therefore, when the bishop's notice to quit was delivered to me on a certain evening in the middle of 1954. It appeared that the Little Sisters of the Poor, replying to his letter which asked if they would

eventually take control of the old people's home, had said no. That was a pity, but there were doubtless a dozen reasons why the sisters were unable to consider the task. What was far worse was the news that a party of priests were soon arriving and would have to be installed in the house the bishop had loaned me.

With great regret, he said, my old men would have to go; and with the concession of three months' notice, so would I and the twins.

It was a bitter blow, and without much sense of consolation I tried to remind myself that God's will determined the course even of such unhappy situations.

For a while I wondered if I could find the resources to maintain the old men's home in some other part of the city. But the meanest house I could discover cost a hundred pounds a month to rent (the cost of living in Bangkok was, I believe, the second highest in the world at this time), and in my heart I knew the work was bound to come to an end. Fortunately I still had the money I had collected with my begging bowl, so at least there would be something to keep the old men going for a few months.

As for myself and the twins, I did not know what the future had in store for us. I was forty-eight years old, not particularly expert in any trade or profession, and very conscious of the illimitable need for such missionary and social achievements as I tried somewhat inadequately to promote.

The twins were not slow in noticing my irritability. Every evening we were in the habit of dancing and singing together while we polished the floors with dusters tied to our shoes. Now for the first time I was distracted and without enthusiasm for this favourite game.

Something will turn up, I reflected. Something must turn up. And as usual, of course, something did—in the shape of several good friends old and new.

First, the bishop offered to pay my passage to England.

Then Maria and Douglas, two English friends who had entertained me often during these last years in Bangkok, offered me a home and a job.

Rupert and Patty, the couple who once considered adopting the twins, proposed that when I came to England they should introduce me to a man who was fired with plans for an adventure in social welfare after my own heart.

This man being the celebrated Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, V.C., the ace R.A.F. flyer whose wartime exploits against the Nazis were known throughout the world.

This same Cheshire was also the man who in England after the war began creating homes and sanatoria for T.B. cases and incurables—it was a lesser-known adventure than his flying.

And Cheshire, I learned, was now talking of a great expansion in the work of his now famous foundation, with new homes to be developed for the ailing needy of India.

So, for the closing months of 1954 and the opening weeks of 1955, while waiting for the boat that would take me and the twins to Europe, I worked as housekeeper for Douglas while Maria was herself on a visit to England.

In the evenings we had wonderful times with Rupert and Patty and many another friend who dropped in for dinner. Often the twins would be awake and waiting to say good night to the visitors, who would ask me: 'Are you taking Mary and Jose to England?'

I remember how the twins' expressions froze during the second's pause before I answered, and I remember the relief that came over their faces each time I said yes.

I remember, too, the December night shortly before we said good-bye to Thailand, when I watched for the last time in my life the festival that creates each year one of the world's most scintillating spectacles.

It was the night of Loy Krathong, a night of full moon, a night when a million imitations of tiny boats, fashioned from banana leaves and paper and candles and torches are

found floating down the Chao Phya River or across the waters of the *klongs*. From miles away people came to the river to watch from the banks and bridges.

This was the annual thanksgiving to the Goddess of Water. '*Loy*' means 'to float'. '*Krathong*' means a 'bowl'. And '*Loy Krathong*' meant floating the illuminated bowls across the water, in order, some said, to float away all one's sins; others, more accurately I imagine, said it was to give the people's thanks to the water spirits before the advent of the rice harvest. A coin was usually placed in each banana leaf or paper boat, into which a tiny candle was also stuck.

No festival of *Loy Krathong* was ever complete without a vast display of fireworks, and on that last night there were stars both real and artificial; stars that stood still and stars that went shooting from the water to the sky.

I watched the little boats for over an hour, then placed my own banana leaf into the river to join the tens of thousands of candle-lit toy ships that floated away until they were lost from view.

Those that capsized were said to be symbols of bad luck. Those that stayed bravely afloat were full of good portents. I peered into the night, but even under the Bangkok full moon it was impossible to discern what happened to my little boat.

A few weeks later a bigger ship, of several thousand tons, floated Mary and Jose and me along the Chao Phya to the ocean, and to England.

Chapter Fifteen

Mary and Jose in England

THE wind howled as we staggered down the gangplank into an English winter of intense cold—the ground snow-covered, the twins dressed in layer upon layer of woollies, their faces barely visible. Waiting in the customs shed, Mary and Jose were seized with the giggles, and I was pleased to think the temperature was not affecting their high spirits.

Jose tugged at my sleeve.

'Mary is smoking out of her mouth,' she said. 'So is the gentleman' (pointing to the customs officer).

Mary then stared at her twin. 'You're smoking out of your own mouth,' she said, and suddenly I realized the experience they were having. Never before had the twins known a cold atmosphere in which the human breath was actually visible. It was a new game for them, and they played it in the train, expelling 'smoke' around the compartment, all the way to London.

Far less trivial was another new experience: the conscious and self-conscious awareness of colour, their own colour, in a foreign country.

We lived for the first two weeks with my sister Edna in London, and she gave us a wonderful welcome. But on our daily sightseeing and shopping tours the twins saw at once

that they were the object of Londoners' curiosity. However cosmopolitan the capital had become in the last few years, however rapid the post-war increase of foreign visitors and coloured immigrants, there was no doubt that a good-looking pair of yellow-skinned children provoked continual stares in the streets of Streatham or around Piccadilly Circus and the West End.

This was not the first time they were unhappily puzzled by racial difference. It happened once at Bangkok; when they overheard a nurse at the Chinese hospital refer to them as *luk chek*, which means 'the half-caste child of Chinese'. The epithet made both girls miserable, and only when they voiced their concern was I aware for the first time that they regarded themselves as English children, knowing that I, being their mother, was also English. Observing how the stigma of *luk chek* was troubling them, I told them the only important thing to remember was that they were '*luk Mummy*'; and for good measure I then began praising the Thai and Chinese races, enthusing over the colour of their skins, their black, smooth hair, in particular the beauty of the women and girls.

Shortly before sailing from Bangkok, the subject once again cropped up with a question from Jose concerning the attitudes of my sisters. 'Will our aunties in England love us with all our black hair?' the child asked. When I explained that the 'aunties' themselves had black hair, the twins were delighted and the fuss subsided.

The problem loomed intermittently throughout their stay in Britain, though for the most part they were too awed and excited to be greatly troubled by the public staring.

We spent an inordinate amount of time in toy shops, which for Mary and Jose were hitherto unknown museums of pleasure, their magic almost equalling that of the London Zoo. At the end of our London fortnight we then took the train for Sheffield to stay with my sister Phyllis. By that time I was already in contact with Cheshire.

It was an impressive experience to meet the dedicated Group Captain whose work and aims were attracting ever more attention each year. Like many a missionary spirit before him, he had that curious impractical quality that nevertheless gets things done in a way that no one is quite able to identify. Arriving at the house where we first met I learned that the group captain was resting, and I felt just the slightest bit offended at having to kick my heels for nearly an hour.

The feeling was dispelled as soon as Cheshire joined me at lunch, which was taken with several of his family of devoted workers.

Like everyone who came in contact with Cheshire I was struck by his extraordinary charm and his capacity for knitting together the co-operative energies of groups that were widely diversified in temperament and background.

In our talk I thought it best to tell him firmly that separation from my twins was not part of the plan for my future activities. Cheshire at once settled any fears I might have on that score.

'I would like you to start our first home in India,' he said, 'and I can see no objection to your taking the twins with you. In fact, children running about the place would be an excellent idea. With incurably sick and old people it would create a fine family atmosphere.'

It would not be long, he said, before he would want me to make ready for our departure. Meantime, I was to begin operations in the English home that later became one of his most prized achievements: Staunton Harold Hall, the former seat of Earl Ferrers, an ancient mansion in a lovely setting of eight acres, with a lake in front and wild swans in view from its windows.

So to Staunton, on the border of Leicestershire, between Derby and Ashby-de-la-Zouche, I moved with Mary and Jose for the two months that remained before we sailed East. I would have dearly loved the twins to know Christmas

in England, but our passage was being fixed for mid-June.

Again, leaving my sisters would be another wrench, I reflected; but I knew, too, that the roving microbe was pretty firmly established in my veins, that I could never settle in England, and that my shuddering resistance to the idea of falling into the proverbial rut was still with me despite my middle age. There are some for whom life in the Far East undoubtedly tends, after twenty years of tropic and oriental ways, to make a deep impression upon some part of the ego. Somehow these more or less lonely travellers, sentimental expatriates with no real roots in the homeland, develop a kind of conviction that says 'We are not as other men or women.'

Right at the start of our Leicestershire interlude I discovered that Staunton Harold Hall was not only an ancient house. It was also a filthy mess.

The place had been empty for at least a dozen years. Italian prisoners were housed there during the war, and now the grime and refuse were just about overpowering the natural beauties. The rooms were bare and the damp cold made them like underground cellars. Worst of all was the accumulated dirt of the years of neglect. I was surprised that Mary and Jose survived the chill of the place as well as they did, but not surprised that they were made miserable by the general slumminess.

It was obvious that only a sustained onslaught with buckets and scrubbing brushes would make the mansion habitable, and I set about the charring while Cheshire and his committee organized the medical, nursing and administrative affairs, ready for the day when Staunton was fit to be opened as a home for incurables.

The first patients were soon installed, and before long Staunton Harold Hall was known to be an enviable haven of comfort for a few among the thousands of tragically sick. Countless volunteer workers had come from miles around to

help with the work, and their little-known labours are a story of inspired welfare effort on a rare scale. Old soldiers, village housewives, members of the Women's Voluntary Services, and local factory workers, were among them.

Most selfless of all, perhaps, were the coal miners who came straight from the pits when they had finished their shifts, devoting several hours to the tougher manual jobs before going home to sleep.

By the time I returned with the twins to London for the final rush of shopping and good-byes, passport formalities, permits and tickets, Staunton was looking a good deal more wholesome following the effort of the past weeks.

Another chapter was closing, a new one beginning—in the hills and dusty towns of India, in beautiful Kodai and slovenly Serampore.

Chapter Sixteen

End and Beginning

It was like an old English cottage set down in the southern hills, towering above jungle country where bison, tiger, antelope, panther, deer and ibex roamed. This was the scene of our new lodgings at Shembaganur, in the South India territory called Kodaikanal, where I was to start the new home for Cheshire's organization.

The main house was built a century ago by a man called Fisher, and was still known as Fisher's Bungalow. Many years later it was bought by Carmelite nuns, who transformed it, developed its garden, and then decided to quit because the site was insufficiently private; in fact, people higher on the hill were able to see directly into the cloister.

And now it was owned by Bob Stoole, a Kodai British resident who was among Cheshire's enthusiastic supporters and was lending this miniature hill station estate for the group captain's latest venture.

Stoole had converted the nuns' parlour into a perfect bungalow for me and the twins. The scenery all around was gentle and peaceful. It was an unusual location in a vale between the hills, but our valley was six thousand feet above sea level. The local guide book was not exaggerating in at least one of its claims. 'Kodai is a gem of nature with its rocks, its woods and woodland ways, its lovely lake and

bracing air. Ideal if you want to see your child build a robust constitution and a complexion as rosy as the lovely flowers which flood the hills during the season.'

As never before, the twins thrived, with the mountain air giving them new energy and colour. They also put inches on their height in a few months.

Shembaganur was about five miles down from Kodai, where Bob Stoole and his wife lived. Kodai is the hill station proper, alive for only two or three months of the year, and well populated with retired civil servants, business folk and others who had either been too long in India, or, too hard up to return to England, were settled there to end their days gracefully, in quiet, and with the advantage of one of the world's best climates. The area was undoubtedly a marvellous health resort, with exceptionally low humidity, the lowest summer maximum and highest winter temperature of all India's hill stations.

Preparing the house as a home for incurables was less simple than we had thought, for we were off the beaten track, a long way from any large town, and the handsome money donations we hoped for were not readily forthcoming. Nevertheless, after weeks of painting and scrubbing I managed with considerable help from the Stooles to get the place in reasonable shape to be operated on a small scale as a local clinic. The native population was on the whole economically depressed, every member of a family obliged to work long hours in order to scrape a living.

My idea was mainly to help the plantation workers employed by the fathers who had a small monastery a few miles above us in the hills; but it was not long before patients were coming long distances to attend for simple treatments or to recover and rest from bouts of fever. Soon we had fifty patients on the register, including several who walked nearly forty miles to reach us. I made no attempt to treat any condition that looked the least bit suspicious, and whenever a more than elementary diagnosis was indicated I

packed them off to a small hill hospital some miles away. Among our first patients was a pathetic middle-aged man who was once a teacher. Parkinson's disease and poverty had reduced him to market-place begging during the last five years.

The real labour of building a home was still to come. After six months in Kodaikanal, six months that were, relatively speaking, a respite from my years of hard work, Cheshire came to India and asked me to go north for a far bigger project to be launched at Serampore near Calcutta.

By this time the six-year-old twins were at school, as weekly boarders with the nuns of the Sisters of the Presentation. Theirs was a first-rate educational centre in Kodai, and the Reverend Mother had made me one magnificent concession. She took Mary and Jose without fees. At the beginning I was a shade nervous about telling her and the sisters that I too was once in the cloister; but when they heard the facts their attitude was altogether sympathetic and considerate.

It was a heavy blow to leave the twins behind during my stay in Serampore. Since the sisters' school was several miles from our bungalow at Shembaganur it was essential to make Mary and Jose weekly boarders, and so I was seeing them only at week-ends, which was little enough. There could be no question, however, of removing them from Kodai, for of all places in India this was where they could be expected to make fine progress both in health and learning. In any event I was obliged to visit Calcutta for an operation; a painful though unimportant breast growth which had irked me for some time had reached a stage where a minor piece of surgery was essential, and I thought I could survey the new Cheshire home while convalescing.

So, with much heartache, I left the twins in the sisters' care and took the train for West Bengal in company with a youthful nurse, also named Teresa, who had helped me in Kodai.

Cheshire's smile was decidedly grim. 'I'm afraid you'll

find the Serampore house in rather bad repair; a bit like Staunton,' he said. 'Needs a good deal of cleaning before you can make a real start with the home.'

I decided to withhold my opinions till we reached Serampore. But when we arrived I was too overwhelmed to express them.

There are probably few places in India so oppressive to the spirit as West Bengal; there are few, if any, districts of West Bengal so woefully lacking the decencies of civilized society as Serampore; and in the whole of Serampore there were certainly few spots so disheartening as the dirty dwelling that was destined to become a happy home for incurables. Surveying the filth when I arrived, it seemed to me that this too was incurable.

The house, presented to Cheshire by the Archbishop of Calcutta, had been in turn a convent and a novitiate for Jesuit fathers, a school of languages and the abode of a parish priest. The priest, Father Dontain, was a man in his sixties who still lived there, and would continue to do so for a further nine months.

Young Teresa and I were shown to a large room which made the worst portions of Staunton seem like a newly spring-cleaned sick bay in an up-to-date nursing home. Spiders' webs hung from the ceiling and were draped over the door. Two rusty iron bedsteads with rotting mattresses stood by the blackened window. A rickety table and two dirt-covered chairs were the only other items of furniture.

Here and in other rooms the floors were so thick with layers of dirt that I had first to obtain shovels before we could buckle down to the normal jobs of cleaning. In one room Teresa and I worked for several hours shovelling the encrusted dust of several years, which came away like clods of earth and exposed an excellent stone floor of the type found in the kitchens of some English country houses.

To clear another room we had two labourers working three days. In our own and other parts of the house the

snake holes were enormous, and black snakes of frightening size would every now and then have to be slaughtered.

White ants had already destroyed vast areas of woodwork. One day, finding a dressing-table with an uncracked jug on top, I made to lift the jug by the handle, and at my touch the entire dressing-table fell to the floor, crumbling into ten thousand chips.

Poor Father Dontain. He was a scholarly, likeable personality who lived so far out of this world that the grime and squalor all about him was barely visible to his eyes. He could not understand my relentless daily round of scraping and scrubbing. 'I swept the floor of your room before you arrived,' he said, uncomprehending, and I am sure he viewed my efforts as totally maniacal.

Long after Cheshire returned to England we were still busily scraping off the dirt, and as each new area of horror was discovered I became more than ever stubbornly determined that our home would be hygienic, if not spotless, for those who came as patients. In between times I had my operation, but with so much to be done in so little time I was not much inclined to obey the doctor's order that I should take a full month's rest before resuming duties.

Then came Elsie Barker.

What has become of Elsie, I wonder? Elsie, our first woman patient, who was brought in off the streets, broken and bent, aged and diseased, yet still with a dash of beauty. Elsie, who claimed to have lived like a princess, who certainly talked with an air of authoritative intimacy about the cuisine and social habits of all the best hotels.

In a confused state, supported by another woman, she came to the home within a few days of my return from the Calcutta hospital following my operation. Elsie was partially paralysed, rather tall, about forty-five; and beneath the unwashed surface it was easy to discern a curiously handsome face, a face that might have belonged, long, long ago, to a fastidious woman.

She had lived and slept for four years in Serampore railway station, begging money to keep herself going in food and cigarettes—mostly the latter, for she was a chain smoker on an almost demented level.

She brought with her all her worldly possessions, contained in a battered tin trunk. Somehow with the aid of the woman conducting her she had managed to hobble along with the trunk and a useless, broken camp bed. For a few nights, while getting our first room for woman patients prepared, I had her sleeping on the floor beside me. Having slept in the station for so long, it was no hardship.

Elsie's mother was European, her father Anglo-Indian. In her teens she had graduated to the theatre from a dancing school, and while still in her early twenties was a renowned Indian dancer commanding high earnings. She occasionally talked of the life of luxury that lay behind her; of famous theatrical names; of the leading hotels where she had stayed during the years when, as she put it, she had money to burn.

At first I was sceptical about the tale, yet could not help being puzzled by the detail of her anecdotes, by the obvious accuracy of much of her information and by the fact that when I examined her, stooped and ailing as she was, I found an astonishingly good figure.

As the weeks wore on Elsie became a maddening fixture of the home. Her greatest vice was her smoking, for which she spent every penny she could beg. While she saw the chance of a smoke, I was her darling, and the men or boys were her 'sons'—a tune that quickly changed to the refrain of 'bloody so-and-so' if ever she were refused. In self-defence I was obliged to buy her occasional packets of cigarettes once she was broke.

Another queer trait was her conviction that she was entitled to treat me as a kind of housekeeper-cum-personal servant. At one stage when I was alone in the home, with all the cooking and chores to cope with as well as the patients' problems, she would yell as if in agonies of pain,

calling me to her side—usually just at a moment when the day's labours were at their busy height.

Often as not, in these rowdy tormented spells, all that Elsie desired was a glass of water.

'Mother! Mother! Quickly, mother!' she shouted for fully five minutes on one occasion. Knowing her tricks by this time I let her yell until I could stand it no longer. When I went in she waved an imperious hand towards a chair on which lay a box of matches. 'Give me a light, mother,' she croaked.

And then, just as I was fearing she would become a permanent resident, she departed. The reason: she was lonely, missing the people and bustle of the railway station. I was returning from Calcutta one afternoon when I found her in the middle of a Serampore street, dragging her tin trunk. The station, she explained, was after all the only spot where she could remain content. I took her to one of the platforms, near her habitual resting place, and left her to her own devices. Many a time afterwards, whenever I was at the station, the hoarse cry of 'Mother, mother, have you got a cigarette?' was my reassurance that Elsie Barker was still going strong.

I had almost forgotten Elsie when casually at the station one evening I enquired of her whereabouts. She was no longer there. She had packed her little tin trunk and trundled it into the street. Two porters saw her pushing it, cursing while she did so. Nobody knew where she was heading, nobody saw her again.

I went on with the work of the home, which was gradually established in the community and very, very gradually made comfortable. In time we had a first-class local committee, devoted and energetic on its behalf. New furniture, some good equipment, growing funds, and more than twenty inmates, began to show that the exhaustion of that awful first year was after all worth while.

At the end of 1958 the home was well and truly on its

feet. We had more serious cases, more deserving perhaps than Elsie, and certainly more responsive to the care and kindness we tried always to maintain.

One young man, a Nepali, had a spinal tumour too far gone for any cure. He was able to move only his head and few of his nights were passed without suffering.

But on his lips, when he was not alone, there was always a smile. Whenever I enquired about his pain, how he felt that day, whether the night was better than the last one, the Nepali answered with the courage that only the totally incurable are able to muster. He smiled even when describing his pain.

The face of the Nepali boy was the answer, if ever I needed one, to any doubts about the years of effort being a fundamental part of the work and will of God.

Chapter Seventeen

My Family

OUR family of four came into being on 2nd November 1958. There was Peter Blackburn, the man I was marrying; there were Jose and Mary, thriving and intelligent schoolgirls, almost nine years old.

At fifty-two I was seeing one thing above all: a bright, unbroken chain of God's goodness leading surely to this day.

Even after my chequered career in Europe and the Far East, after renouncing the vows of formal religious life, and long after adopting my twins, the notion of a husband and father seemed never to take shape, or to be relevant and desirable, until the day Peter Blackburn uttered his quiet proposal, giving the pattern of our 'family' all at once a comforting reality. Until then no marriage except the momentous adolescent wedding with Christ had ever entered my immature thoughts.

It was in the course of my work in grimy Serampore that I first met Peter, a tall, humorous bachelor about my own age, who made no deep impression during the first year beyond the hint that here was just another affable human being. He was born in India of Irish and Australian parents, ran his own small business dealing in spices, peppers, curry powders and suchlike, and lived with an elderly aunt who had befriended me soon after my arrival. She it was, in fact,

who first provided me with cups to drink from and a bed to sleep in at my snake-infested, cobweb-laden quarters in Serampore.

Often in the months that followed, and later still after Peter and I were married, I would be amused by the recollection of our first meeting, and more especially by the memory of my own unbidden thoughts when Peter first entered the room where I sat talking over tea with his aunt. The Blackburns occupied a big house of thirteen rooms at Barrackpore, across the murky Hooghly River from my Serampore headquarters, and it was at the instigation of Group Captain Cheshire that I had gone to visit Mrs. Blackburn, the ailing woman who proved herself as firm a friend to me as she had been to Cheshire and his rest-home project.

On this particular day I had been settled for only a few minutes in an armchair in the sitting-room when there was a tap at the door. A second later, in walked . . . nephew Peter, tall, middle-aged and, I decided, the perfect illustration of what is called a distinguished bearing. I quickly registered that he was good-looking, that his thick, handsome hair was white, and that his eyes were bright and grey-green. And then in a flash I was telling myself: 'Don't be a fool!' For it suddenly hit me that my true, spur-of-the-moment reaction, if I were honest about it, had been the instant reflection (and for me this was an astonishing reflection): 'I could *marry* a man like that.'

Just as suddenly the thought was gone, not to re-emerge for nearly two years; and apart from this little aberration of my normal self, I found him—as indeed he found me—just one more among the innumerable 'nice' people who might be encountered in any country of the world.

During the next twelve months I crossed the river to pay only occasional visits to Mrs. Blackburn at Barrackpore. Sometimes Peter would be in the house, sometimes not. Still less frequently I would meet him in the street while shopping in Calcutta—but we never did more than pass the time of

day, and it was not long before I was assuming we had nothing in common.

Nevertheless, I saw in the course of my visits to the house that he was good-natured, diffident, polite and attentive—and markedly considerate towards his aunt, who was inclined to boss him slightly and to treat him as a youngster rather than the mature, if sheltered, individual that he was. I noted too that his calm, unvarying temperament was precisely the opposite to my own. Peter was always easy-going, and obviously influenced by the lackadaisical Far Eastern tendency to assume, in business and in most other spheres, that tomorrow is as good as today. The contrast between this and my own impatient attempts to get everything finished at once, and then almost in the same breath to look for the next job, served only to support the idea that we would be an ill-matched pair of associates.

At all events the relationship, such as it was, jogged along in haphazard fashion until about a year after our first meeting. Peter's aunt then became gravely ill. At Serampore one evening I received a letter in which he gave me this news and, surprisingly, asked if I would come as soon as possible to give Mrs. Blackburn whatever comfort I could. I went the next morning, crossing the Hooghly as I always did in one of the grimy native dinghies that provide one of the most ramshackle ferry services you ever saw.

We met at the door and the first thing I noticed was the worn, harassed, somewhat lost expression on Peter's face.

'I'm afraid it's the end,' he said. 'She has been ill for weeks, and refused to let me get her into a nursing home, or even install a nurse here in the house.'

'Then who has been looking after her?' I asked.

'The girls—our cook's daughters. My aunt has always been attached to them, she knew them as babies, and they've been wonderfully devoted to her all through these last weeks. But they're not nurses, and apart from making her bed

comfortable, and sponging her face, they've not been able to do much.'

Not that there was much that *I* could do, for it was plain enough the old lady had not much longer to live. I spent a few hours tidying up and making her as happy and comfortable as I could, hurried back to Serampore where there were many chores to be finished, and returned to Peter's house the next day. By this time she was going rapidly downhill and it was merely a matter of hours before she reached the end.

When death finally came, I performed the last Offices, then sat for a while talking with Peter before boarding the dinghy once more to resume my work.

And that, to all intents, was the end of my brief acquaintanceship with Peter Blackburn. True, I visited him two or three times in the months that followed, after learning that he felt very much alone, but still there seemed to be little common ground between us, and I was anyway far too busy with the labours of the Serampore home to seek or dream of anything more substantial than the most casual friendship.

Occasionally Father Dontain would say: 'Peter is a terribly lonely man—why don't you visit him more often?' And I would make the additional excuse that the dinghy trip across the river (at the best of times not particularly safe) was too exhausting. Before long the subject was dropped.

Out of the blue, months afterwards, Peter crossed my path again. Somewhere near Christmas we ran into each other at the home of two mutual friends, an agreeable Indian couple who were already, though I did not suspect it, intent on as nice a piece of matchmaking as ever was known in this land of matchmakers. Even when they began inviting Peter and me more regularly to tea, and urging him to take me out to lunch or on picnics, I remained incredibly green about the significance of their efforts. The wife, who was one of my good friends, kept harping on the plight of 'poor Peter',

or, yet more often, 'poor lonely Peter'—and one day after a *tête-à-tête* in which I grew distinctly bored with this refrain, I told her: 'If the man is so poor and lonely, for heaven's sake let him find someone to marry.'

'That's exactly what he would like,' she said. 'But what Peter needs is a really capable wife and friend, an English woman who shares his interests, who is intelligent, who is not too young, who can help with his business, who is not afraid of hard work, who is a good companion, and who has the same religion. . . .'

Absurd as it now seems, I said good-bye and went about my affairs still not realizing that the attributes she had carefully listed were supposed to be *mine*, and that *I* was the sought-after good companion.

An hour or so later, however, the message began to sink in. When it did, its effect was to make me suddenly furious with Peter Blackburn, for I began reflecting that it was Peter who was setting about this odd courtship by proxy. 'The blighter is doing it the Indian way,' I said to myself angrily. 'And if he hasn't the guts to ask me himself, properly, honestly . . .' The thought was left unformed, unspoken.

Then, with what I suppose could be viewed as a kind of womanly logic, I vowed never to see him again—and straight away made plans to pay him an early visit, this time for the express purpose of discovering if I could fathom his intentions.

The following Sunday, and the next, and again the next, I dropped in at Barrackpore on my way home from church. We chatted amiably, and although nothing of personal importance was discussed, I knew Peter was growing ever more serious when he began proposing lunches and week-end outings.

The first time he took me out we talked about his business. . . .

The second time we talked of books and music. . . .

The third time, and in fascinating vein, he reminisced

about his childhood. As we sat over dinner the boyish story came out, in bursts of fact that were mixed with half-forgotten memories and anecdotes. His parents, Australian and Irish, lived in the house near Dum-Dum which Clive of India once occupied. Peter was born in this house, which for a time possessed a deep moat. . . .

'A moat,' said Peter, 'where I was nearly drowned one day when I decided to go off and sail the seas using a wooden packing-case for a ship.'

I watched him as he sat sipping coffee and let him ramble without interruption.

'They say I used to stuff my teddy-bear into the water pipes and cause miniature floods. . . .

'I was never exactly a model child. . . .

'I'm afraid that later on I sometimes stole chickens from the bishop's garden, and got a servant to cook them for me. . . .'

His mother, like mine, had died when he was just fourteen. For a time he continued living with his father, then with an uncle, then once more with his father—and finally with Mrs. Blackburn, the aunt for whom he had cared so well when fortune brought us together.

Very soon, but almost imperceptibly, we grew to that quite important stage in a relationship where people begin to enjoy chaffing and poking fun at each other. At the end of one such enjoyable day we shook hands a good deal more affectionately than usual, and Peter said, simply: 'I count you the best companion I ever had.' Although I did not say so I realized well enough that he was certainly the best companion *I* ever had.

Nevertheless, several more months rolled by and still I remained—not so much emotionally unaware of him, but emotionally unattached to this tall, bespectacled charmer for whom the very deepest attachment was soon to be formed.

Nowadays I know with a fair degree of certainty that twenty years of convent life had left me, when they ended at

the age of thirty-six, at the intellectual and emotional levels of an adolescent girl; and even at fifty I seemed to have advanced not much further than the average woman's emotional thirties. Presumably this quirk of middle age was the key to my oddly unawakened state; and odd indeed it now seems, for at the time of these meetings with Peter I was already the more or less experienced mother of the seven-year-old twins.

The issue was brought to a head when it was mooted that I should start work at the newest Cheshire centre—the world centre that was to be opened far away in the north at Dehra Dun. I had already half committed myself to Cheshire for this scheme, and now I was in a tremendous turmoil of unresolved feelings. I knew perfectly well that marriage was now in Peter's mind, but all the same he had not yet come out with the big question; and I certainly did not want to force his hand. I decided therefore that the only course was to give him a decisive and probably a last opportunity to put the question of marriage. One evening, after we had spent the whole day together, I announced that the Dehra Dun home was to be opened a few months hence—and told him I would have to go there. Peter's response was characteristic, forthright, without guile. 'In that case,' he said, 'I think you should ask Cheshire to find someone to take your place.... I want you to marry me.'

The deed done, there was no more to be said. The scale and significance of our companionship was suddenly transformed, and now it appeared to me as the most natural step in the world to be taken, though still with a good deal of thought and prayer.

There we stood in the Catholic church on that November day, guided slowly and peacefully through the same ceremony that millions of women before me had looked upon with no less joy, though not, I imagine, with the same unbidden thoughts and pictures flashing from out of the past.

Standing next to Peter in his dark lounge suit, I glanced down at my high-heeled shoes and soft silk dress with jewelled clips, and could barely suppress a smile at the thought of the frivolous hat resting on permed and newly styled hair. Vaguely self-conscious also of the ear-rings I now wore, the sheer nylons, the discreet make-up, the bridal bouquet—all the trappings of an indisputably earthly wedding—how phenomenal it seemed alongside the recollection of my novice's vows, the distant years of the pledges to a heavenly lover, and the Clothing Day when the veil was brought to me by an austere Reverend Mother in a convent chapel in the London of the 'twenties.

Inevitably the events of that other, far-off marriage came crowding in, inevitably I found myself slipping back to the glorious midsummer of the second year at my first convent when I was just seventeen. And yet again to that other midsummer day when I pronounced my vows.

Chastity, Obedience, Poverty. . . .

It was a far cry from the bustling hot day, shortly before marrying Peter, that I spent dashing around Calcutta shops with a mind firmly concentrated on new curtain materials, linen and saucepans for our house across the river from Serampore.

In the church, as Peter placed the ring on the third finger of my left hand, it was impossible to suppress one further scene from the past. Three years to the day after my profession at nineteen the bishop had placed a ring on the third finger of my right hand. I was pronouncing my final vows, those perpetual vows from which a nun may be released only by the Pope himself. At this final profession the holy marriage was made complete.

The worst calamity then imaginable was that the most blessed of wedding rings should ever be removed. Nevertheless, half-way through the Second World War it was removed, amid doubts, and distress, and the knowledge that I was throwing aside great graces.

Today, nevertheless, I have become firm in the belief that God determined it, perhaps for two reasons.

The first was to enable my pursuit of the thousand-and-one jobs I passionately wanted to perform while living among the sick, the aged, the poor, and the mothers and babies of the Far East—above all, the babies I delivered with my own hands, often under far from sterile conditions through long sweating nights and torrential monsoon days in Thailand.

The second was to equip me for my role in the lives of the twins—born, so it seemed, almost certain to die within a few hours, then to begin their unexpected struggle and miraculously survive those weeks of frailty when the most hardened gambler would have laid no bets on their chances of recovery.

Before long they were conscious of a rather different frailty, a fault in the structure of the family trio we had built together. Through their childhood we had known times of enormous joy as well as struggle, but for the twins one glaring fact always stood out. We were a mother and daughters without a father.

All that is now changed, our family of four has at last come into its own, and the twins are well content, though I doubt if their satisfaction can equal mine.

This much is certain. For the twins, as for myself and Peter, the centrepiece of this new world of contentment is our home—the first real home that the twins and I have ever known.

Towards the end of my first year of marriage I was also more than ever convinced that each phase of life had led in its own curious fashion to the idyllic present. If my own childhood had not been a sheltered one, I would probably have been unable to slip so easily into the strict religious life. By the same token, without the training and formative years as a religious, I doubt if I could have tolerated the condition of loneliness, nor the hardships. And only because I

lacked the orthodox patterns of a young woman's experience was I directed into that way of life that led the twins towards me, and me towards Peter.

Now the real fullness of living is truly ours, despite the fact that in worldly matters we missed so much.

In countless simple and unexpected ways I often found myself surprised by various aspects of the possession and running of a home. It took quite a time, for example, to realize that I could bring out my personal belongings and no longer be terrified of losing them, or of finding them mixed up with other people's chattels.

After years spent managing rest-homes, hospitals and similar institutions I found that managing a house of my own, even a thirteen-roomed house, was not an enormous hardship.

But I found, too, that after years of catering for large groups of hungry unfortunates, the cooking of a dinner for Peter and myself was at first quite a tricky operation. . . . I was inclined for a long time to cook far more than we could eat, sometimes leaving enough for three good meals.

Again, I found that the traditional picture of the need for substantial 'give and take' in the affairs of married life had little meaning for us. Respecting each other's desires and opinions seemed to come naturally, and a much greater problem emerged in the adjustment required for two people who were totally unaccustomed to dependence upon others. I still have not acquired the habit of allowing my husband to do things for me.

With home-making, the needs of the twins at home or at school, and the demands of the business—at which Peter and I now labour together—the days are as hectic as ever. We rise early each morning. We are both obliged to buckle down to the job of making the spices and powders, and although we do our best to expand production we remain acutely short of labour and cannot yet afford the luxury of the newest machinery. Our social life is small, and confined to

the few friends who have been dear to us in good times and bad.

One day perhaps we shall enjoy a style of living which is, as they say, more gracious. It does not really matter. With all that God has given me I should be a far, far better woman than I am . . . but it cannot be denied meantime that I am a far, far happier woman than ever I was.

(continued from front flap)

forbidden to return to her beloved Thailand, she was torn by a severe mental and spiritual conflict. After a great inner struggle she finally made her decision and asked to be released from her Order. In 1942 her petition was granted; at the age of thirty-six she was suddenly faced with making a new life for herself in the world she had left twenty years before. Her first "life" had come to an end, but her decision marked the beginning of two even more fascinating lives that were to follow.

Teresa Lightwood's story is all the more inspiring because of the simplicity and sincerity of the telling. A woman who has lived in exotic lands, who has experienced extraordinary adventures and demonstrated an almost chameleon-like ability to adapt herself to whatever life offered, she emerges in these pages as a modest, hardworking, courageous person who has been richly rewarded for her unselfish devotion to others.

Jacket by David Collier

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